

Willowbrook director 'settled'

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Three weeks ago, a series of tremors began to shake the unstable little town of Willowbrook Developmental Center with the persistence of a minor earthquake — minor but threatening to escalate into a full-blown explosion.

And if it weren't for a small, bookish woman with neat wire-framed glasses who sat at the director's chair like a pilot ready at the controls of a bomber, they might have.

The Willowbrook directorship, after all, has been called the third toughest job in America and it came to Elin Marie Howe at a particularly inopportune moment.

The massive home for the retarded —

right at the center of everyone's attention, Miss Howe points out — was going through extraordinary changes. Just that day, the state Department of Mental Hygiene had surrendered some buildings with 640 residents to the United Cerebral Palsy Association.

The union representing an estimated 4,000 institutional workers was up in arms, threatening to strike; the parents were outraged by conditions in the buildings; the federal court wasn't helping much, and the director, Dr. Levester Cannon, had resigned that day, leaving Willowbrook in a vacuum.

So along comes Elin Marie Howe, at 30 less experienced than most, a woman, too, rifling in to fill the gap with a touch of New England gracefulness and steely cool aloofness from turmoil.



Elin Marie Howe

And everyone seems to like her, a fact she thinks important since "there is no way we're ever going to get anything done if there is constant fighting among us."

During the takeover days, Miss Howe made her presence known to workers by paying sneak visits to Willowbrook buildings at odd hours of the night. "If I saw something wrong," she explained, "I'd tell the offender and the problem was generally straightened out."

She says she worked long hours "to make sure the transition worked well," to see to it that employee unrest was minimized and patient care up to par.

And as Willowbrook's deputy director for administration for more than a year, she claims she fell into the job naturally and was as prepared for the confusion as she could have been.

"But it was a difficult time anyway," she acknowledges, reminding one quickly, however, that "we're settling down now, and since our population has been reduced, there is now a tremendous potential to expand on some of the good things that are happening here."

She is enjoying her work so much (it's the type of business you either love or can't work in, she explains) that she'll probably apply to be permanent facility director, which would make her the first woman and the youngest person to hold the Willowbrook post.

"I want to make a contribution on a larger scale," says Miss Howe, who lives alone in Grasmere in a newly purchased home. "When I first came to Willowbrook in 1973 (as part of a central Department of Mental Hygiene task force), I felt differently, though; it was hard for me to understand.

"I guess I'd never really seen retarded individuals before. Oh, you know, I was familiar with mildly and moderately retarded persons, but I'd never seen a spastic, or a deaf-blind, someone with multiple handicaps.

Page 1
of 2

"I finally came to realize just how many needs these people have," Miss Howe explained. "And at that point I wanted to try to figure out how to manage things better, how to provide those services for people with incredibly complicated problems."

She asked to be transferred out of Albany's central mental hygiene office, gaining a position as business officer at the Brooklyn Developmental Center. Then, several months later, Elin Marie Howe, born and raised in a Boston suburb, educated richly in the art and theory of public administration, decided it was time to return to Willowbrook.

She is a formidably self-disciplined person, according to her colleagues at Willowbrook, but it remains to be seen whether she can skipper a tough, taut Willowbrook ship — her goal, she admits, and a major problem for some of her predecessors.

She talks in precisely structured sentences, as tidy as her appearance and never-out-of-place brown hair. There is seriousness and a certain amount of

coolness in her voice, but also directness and intimacy in what she intends to do as long as she remains the institution's director.

"As long as I feel I can help improve the organization, I'll want to continue," explains Miss Howe in her spacious office on the second floor of Willowbrook's administration building. "It's really a tremendous opportunity for a young person like myself."

Characteristically, she has dug in with some immediate management changes, and most important, Miss Howe confides, "will be the attempt to make every supervisor here accountable to us."

Miss Howe explained that lower grade Willowbrook employees are often blamed for the mistakes of the managers. "We've got to tell the supervisors what they're supposed to be doing, because some of them don't really know."

She intends to crack down on excessive absenteeism and lateness that mar the records of some employees, but she stresses, "Most of the employees here are dedicated, sincere people. We've got to make sure each and everyone of them understands precisely his function."

But the two most visible and troublesome issues confronting Miss Howe are the deinstitutionalization effort — Willowbrook must have no more than 250 residents by 1981 — and the "improvement of care and programs for our institutionalized residents."

And the way to achieve these, according to Miss Howe, is through a "good collective effort on the part of all of Willowbrook's vested-interest groups."

"If we have differences," she says, "let's sit down and talk about them. Generally, we'll find, we're not too far apart."

"What Willowbrook needs most is an end to the turmoil. Sometimes," Miss Howe admits, "we have a tendency to forget that our goal is to improve care for our residents."

And as the institution's acting director, she will attempt to succor the 5,000 plus retarded — half of whom are still at Willowbrook, the remainder in community group homes.

Serene, unflappably cool and direct are the characteristics Miss Howe's associates say she will bring to the job. Then, almost without exception, they mention that "underneath all that manager is a very warm and sensitive person."

But it is still too early to tell whether Miss Howe will be appointed Willowbrook's next permanent director, making her the fifth to hold the high-pressure job in three years.

The Department of Mental Hygiene's central office is not saying what it will do, though an official said, "We want to fill the post quickly. We're certainly going to be considering Elin, because she's done a dynamite job so far under the most trying conditions imaginable."

Page 2
of 2