

"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."

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