

'NEW' WILLOWBROOK HOLDS AN OPEN HOUSE

United Cerebral Palsy and State
Join in Seeking Public Support
for the Mentally Retarded

By LAURIE JOHNSTON

Seven weeks after part of the operation of the Willowbrook Developmental Center on Staten Island was taken over by United Cerebral Palsy, the staffs of the state facility and the private contractor have combined against a common enemy. They held a joint open house yesterday to combat widespread resistance of communities to the state's program to relocate the mentally retarded in small, neighborhood facilities.

Twenty-three residential buildings, seven of them now run by United Cerebral Palsy, were open to the public under the sponsorship of Willowbrook's volunteer services office. Although the combined population is now down to about 2,400—reduced from a one-time high of 6,300—the volunteer office has intensified its recruiting.

The steady boom-boom of a bass drum and the clang of cymbals enlivened the sunny grounds as a band marched proudly in lemon-yellow tunics and shako-styled hats, with a flag-bearer leading and a baton carrier near the rear. The band members, aged 25 to the mid-60's, were from Building 19, which houses the highest-functioning adult male residents.

The two staffs showed little, if any, evidence of disharmony, despite the recent threat of a job action by unionized employees of the state-operated center. The local, representing 4,000 state workers, had feared layoffs because of the take-over by the private agency.

Dr. Eric Clarke, associate director of the United Cerebral Palsy unit at Willowbrook, said that there had been no layoffs since the change but that the issue was still unresolved. As the result of a suit by parents and others concerned about previous conditions at Willowbrook, the facility is under court order to disperse its patients gradually toward a goal of 250 remaining residents in 1981.

The United Cerebral Palsy contract, which covers 625 residents, is aimed particularly at faster achievement of relative self-sufficiency by those 7 to 21 years old.

At yesterday's open house, designed to overcome the public's "lack of understanding and fear of the unknown," the auditorium program included slide shows on Willowbrook's daily life and gardening projects and a film, "A World of the Right Size," showing what communities can expect from small facilities for different levels of mental retardation.

"I'm not sure I saw that many people from the community are here today," Dr. Clarke said later. "It might have been mostly parents and prospective volunteers—even though the community reacts a lot if a home is proposed in a neighborhood."



The New York Times/Fred R. Conrad

Mother embraces retarded, 25-year-old daughter at Willowbrook open house

Parents and other relatives walked the grounds hand in hand with residents, young or middle-aged, and sometimes shepherded them into the auditorium to share the coffee and doughnuts.

"My Sister doesn't really take to the open house—she's -34, and she's been here 27 years and only says a few words, but she tried to say 'polish' when I was doing her nails today," said a woman who requested anonymity. "Because of the lowered population, they're moving her to a building where the residents are a less acting-out group. I think she'll benefit."

A registered nurse from Brooklyn, noting that she had visited her son "every Sunday for the last 12 years," said her hopes for the "new" Willowbrook were simple.

"If they can just teach my son to walk —" she said. "I brought him out here, and everything deteriorated. He just went down the drain."

Sally Richardson, a computer operator from Brooklyn's Williamsburg section, offered a strong dissent.

"I'm the one that has nothing bad to say about Willowbrook," she said, explaining that her daughter, Claudette, had been there 19 of her 25 years and had learned to feed herself. As one of the severely retarded, unable to speak or keep herself clean, the young woman would continue to need much the same care, but Mrs. Richardson was concerned that "it's a big mistake" to phase out Willowbrook so drastically.

"With children of [Claudette's] mentality, I don't think that group-home planning is important," she said. "They won't have the beautiful grounds and play areas they have here. I don't think the difference will get through to them—and where else could you feel your child was so safe?"