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Commentary/

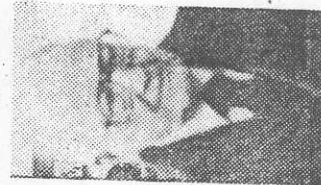
Court intervention unnecessary following Willowbrook progress

By ELIZABETH CONNELLY

When I first walked through the wards of Willowbrook State School as a state legislator eight years ago, I was disheartened by what I saw. We all know the horror stories that were told about Willowbrook back then, when the center's name was synonymous with the worst in institutional care.

But Willowbrook has come a long way since then. When we passed a law in the late 1970s changing Willowbrook's name to the Staten Island Developmental Center, we sought to erase the stigma of Willowbrook, and for good reason.

Under the impetus of the 1975 Willowbrook Consent Decree the state had done much at that point to clean up the institution.



John Bartels

Since the decree was handed down, medical care has improved and staff supervision and training has moved ahead. There are now programs for people who formerly sat idle for hours. And, of course, there has been steady, albeit slow progress in moving mentally retarded residents into homes in the community, where, the court theorized, they could live more normal lives.

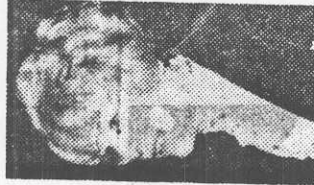
There is little doubt, despite all this, that Willowbrook — a name the center can't seem to shake — can improve care for its residents. There are still lapses in care; there are still staff problems; there are still empty moments for residents. Perhaps those evils are inherent in institutional living, which sometimes seems to bring the worst out in residents, making care difficult and impeding progress.

While I agree that Willowbrook must continue to improve, I most strongly disagree with the decision handed down recently by U.S. District Court Judge John R. Bartels to appoint a master for

the center, in effect taking control of the institution from the state which, as we all know, pays the bills for the center's operation.

Based on what I have seen and reports from persons within the center — my office is located in the center's administration building — the incidents upon which Bartels based his decision are not typical of care at the center. Although he spoke of patients who sat on floors covered with human excrement, a teacher at the center for the past five years told a staff member of mine that she has yet to witness such a thing. It would seem that five years of working day to day in the center are worth far more than Bartels' one-shot surprise visit a few months ago.

To me what is so incredible about the statements in his decision is that they do not reflect conditions as they are or as they were on the day of his visit, according to those who accompanied him on the tour. It would seem that he had, for whatever



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staff should be congratulated on their efforts and dedication. Working with the very severely and profoundly retarded is one of the most difficult and challenging endeavors human beings can undertake on behalf of their fellow human beings.

In addition, I feel Bartels' decision to appoint the master was far too radical and certainly contradictory in light of his admission that the state has exercised "good faith and efforts" in its attempts to better run the center.

his reasons, merely ignored what he saw and instead chose to fall back on statements from press coverage of the pre-consent decree era.

We can only wonder. As a matter of fact, the center administration and staff should be congratulated on their efforts and dedication. Working with the very severely and profoundly retarded is one of the most difficult and challenging endeavors human beings can undertake on behalf of their fellow human beings.

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Tragically, the publicity that his decision has brought will set back by years the effort to place those center residents who are appropriate for such living arrangements in community settings, which should be the top priority for all of us. The only way to cure the problems of the institution is to scale down the institution.

By naming a master to oversee the center, the courts in effect appointed someone to do the job that had been done by the Willowbrook Review Panel, which was abolished last year as a result of attempts to reduce its budget. Serving on the seven-member panel were experts in retardation from such places as Georgia and Michigan — experts whose airfare, hotel rooms, meals and per diem salaries were costing the state a scandalous sum.

What I had favored was simply requiring that panel members come from the local area. This area certainly must offer enough experts in the field of mental retardation and developmental disabilities to staff the panel and thus contain its extravagant costs — money that would be better spent improving conditions at the developmental center and moving appropriate residents out into the community.

There is no doubt that the state must be monitored and must be



Scenes such as this were commonplace at Willowbrook State School prior to a court-mandated reform of the institution developed in 1975. Now a federal court judge has said care at the facility remains inadequate.

accountable. But I question how much Bartels has accomplished in his latest decision. He has demoralized staff at the institution and once again implanted the image in the public mind of Willowbrook as the "snakepit" — the late Robert F. Kennedy's label, which no longer fits.

How can we expect the community to welcome the retarded to live in its midst when the

state, which will oversee group homes for the retarded, is deemed unfit to oversee the institution from whence they will come?

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(Elizabeth A. Connelly, who represents Staten Island's 61st Assembly District, originally prepared this article for an internal publication at the Staten Island Developmental Center.)