

Our opinion/

Nineteen years later, bad news from SIDC

The year was 1965 and Robert Kennedy was a United States senator from New York. In September of that year, the senator paid a surprise visit to Willowbrook State School. He did not like what he saw.

"There are many — far too many — living in filth and dirt, their clothing in rags, in rooms less comfortable and cheerful than the cages in which we put animals in a zoo," Sen. Kennedy said afterward.

How far have we come since 1965?

In that year, Sen. Kennedy stood before a state legislative committee and held up a pamphlet of standards from the American Association on Mental Deficiency. "You can open it to almost any page and measure another way in which we fail to meet these standards," he said.

Last week, the Advance obtained a copy of a federal survey of the Staten Island Developmental Center (as Willowbrook is now called). It was conducted this past February.

The report runs 60 pages, and, like Sen. Kennedy's pamphlet from the American Association on Mental Deficiency, you can open it to almost any page and measure another way in which the developmental center fails to meet standards.

It is a depressing report. It documents, page after page, the horrors of life at the developmental center: Residents without clothes; spoiled food; feces-encrusted toilets and bathrooms; drowsy or drugged residents; inadequate rehabilitation programs.

Picking out shocking passages is not difficult. Practically every page contains another description of bad conditions at the center. On page 11, for example, there is this:

"In Building 10, in the basement, what appeared to be raw sewage had backed up in a storeroom area and flowed out into the hall. The smell was foul and overpowering. Three days

later, even though the stoppage had been cleared, the floors were still covered with dried substances that gave off an odor."

And on page 38, there is this:

"Based on the review of 29 charts specifically for a nutritional input, the dietitians were not providing adequate nutritional care. It should be noted that the staffing of four dietitians and one dietitian technician assigned to client care presents a client-staff ratio inconsistent with the generally accepted norm."

These are not extreme examples, pulled out of context for the shock value. These are typical remarks, pulled out at random from the 60-page report. There are many, many more observations just like them.

It is, frankly, surprising that conditions like these still exist. Certainly there have been improvements. Nobody compares the institution to a snake pit or a zoo any longer. And, in fairness, the investigators were *looking* for deficiencies. Their report does not describe the center's good points because that was not their job.

Another report, released a week earlier by the center's court-appointed overseer, lists both improvements and deficiencies at the developmental center. Depending on how one reads it, the report is either encouraging (the director's view) or "pretty shocking" (the New York Civil Liberties Union's view).

Still, the federal report gives us good reason for concern. It does not paint a pretty picture. True, there have been some dramatic improvements since the days of shame in the 1960s and '70s, but there is still much to be improved at the developmental center.

That such a report could be issued in 1984, a full 19 years after the Kennedy visit, is an indication not of how far we have come since then, but of how much further we have to go.