

Ex-Willowbrook chiefs tell of frustrations

By ALICE McQUILLAN
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Parents with retarded children vowed "constant vigilance" after past directors of the infamous Willowbrook State School said yesterday that bureaucracy often thwarted their reform efforts.

During an emotional panel discussion at closing ceremonies for the state institution, directors said they often felt frustrated by obstacles from politically motivated oversight panels to abusive staff that were hard to fire.

"Institutions are a mistake, regardless of their size," said Levester Cannon, director from June 1976 to October 1977.

To parent groups, these confessions from people trying to clean up the facility the late Robert Kennedy called a "snake pit" proved that outside watchdogs are the only way to push through reform.

"No one questions their good faith, but you need the constant vigilance of the public," said Tony Pinto, president of the Benevolent Society for Retarded Children.

Looking at the panel of six former directors and the present one



Former directors of the Staten Island Developmental Center share a table. From left, Dr. Miodrag Ristich, James Forde, Levester Cannon, Elin Howe, Ella Curry and James M. Walsh.

Pinto added: "They're just functionaries that respond to a higher voice, to a government that's run by money."

Several parents said eyes should now turn to the smaller community group homes for the mentally retarded that have been the trend since the push for deinstitutionalization, born out by the closing of Willowbrook, renamed the Staten Island Developmental Center.

"We have to continue eternal vigilance — we can't let that down," said Ann Nehrbauser. "We have to keep the standards up and someone has to take care of our

children."

The nearly three-hour session, billed as directors reflecting on issues and problems, saw them credit parents for spurring reform, list accomplishments like education and community programs and praise some good and dedicated staffers who hung on. But they stopped short of an apology for the past.

Instead, panel moderator Thomas Coughlin, a past director and now commissioner of the state Department of Correctional Services, said an apology was too personal when society and past ways of dealing with the mentally

ill were part of the problem.

Asked why it took a court order to liberate patients from crowded wards, Coughlin blamed the state's "massive bureaucracy" where the "concept of community living for the retarded hadn't been realized."

An emotional line of questioning over a bureaucrat's moral conscience conflicting with orders was opened by Arthur Webb, commissioner of the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. He posed the question to panelists who he had introduced as "the people on the firing line" and often "the scape-

goats."

Elin M. Howe, director from 1977 to 1980, said she had wondered about assuring parents their kids were OK while watching one staffer have to scramble after some half dozen patients.

Cannon said the most difficult was dealing with oversight panels interested in political mileage but who "really didn't give a damn about what was happening in Willowbrook."

The directors called Willowbrook a tough job, especially so because some were only in their 30s when leading the massive institution. Dr. Miodrag Ristich, who headed the facility from 1972

to 1974 right after the abuses were the subject of riveting headlines and TV programs, said he was just 33 when running "a place built for 1,500 residents having 6,000." He said he went from a facility in Minnesota, where there were maybe three to five deaths a year, to Willowbrook, where there were that many deaths daily.

"I honestly do not feel sorry for myself," he said. "But when I talk about miseries, patients went through great miseries."

The directors also confessed to intense personal worry, sometimes threats on their life, from the job. Cracking down on abusive, drugged-out staffers left Ella A. Curry, director from 1980 to 1983, with death threats, kidnapping threats against her kids and damage to her home.

"The heat got so bad, I had to get the hell out of the country," she said.

"I remember the day I left Willowbrook," said Cannon. "My stomach stopped hurting. It had hurt for 16 months."

Other directors attending the session were James Forde, who served from 1974 to 1975, and James M. Walsh, the facility's current director.

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