

Willowbrook's history at a glance

1938: The State Legislature appropriates \$5.1 million to purchase land in Willowbrook Park and construct a hospital to relieve the overcrowding of mentally retarded residents at the Letchworth Village facility in Rockland County.

1942: Willowbrook is ready to open but is leased to the federal government for use during World War II. The Army adds buildings and opens Halloran General Hospital, which would serve 2,500 patients a day.

1947: The campus is transferred to the Veterans Administration and becomes the Halloran VA Hospital, despite New York state's insistence that the facilities are needed as institution space.

1951: The campus returns to the state's control and the Willowbrook State School opens. Within a year, 2,450 mentally retarded children reside there.

1962: Willowbrook's census peaks at 6,200, approaching twice the planned capacity of 3,500.

1965: In August, the Staten Island Advance runs a series entitled: "What's Wrong with Willowbrook." A month later, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy tours the facility during a surprise inspection and describes the institution as bordering on a "snake pit."

1971: In a chilling series, 21-year-old Advance reporter Jane Kurtin exposes the hideous conditions under which thousands of retarded children are living. Within two months, TV reporter Geraldo Rivera brought the story to the nation.

1972: The New York Civil Liberties Union brings a class action lawsuit against the state, on behalf of 5,300 Willowbrook residents.

1975: The suit results in a federal court agreement known as the Willowbrook Consent Decree, which laid the groundwork for statewide reform in the care, education and housing of the developmentally disabled.

1987: Willowbrook, which had become the Staten Island Developmental Center, closes, with most former residents having been relocated to community-based group homes. Approximately 120 clients remain on the campus living in small residences known as the Richmond Complex.

1992: The final settlement of the Willowbrook Consent decree is signed in Brooklyn federal court, providing for the continued monitoring of all reforms spurred by the landmark judgment.

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