

Willowbrook's complex past

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 in the Letchworth Village facility in upstate 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 Haloran General Hospital, which would serve 2,500 patients a day.

1951: After serving as a veterans' hospital, the Willowbrook State School finally 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 Advance runs a series titled "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 Gerald Rivera brings 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 people with developmental disabilities.

1987: Willowbrook, which had become the Staten Island Developmental Center, closes. Most former residents were relocated to community-based group homes, with about 120 clients remaining on the campus in small residences known as the Richmond Complex.

1993: 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.