

Willowbrook and its impact on history

Law



I am going to begin this essay discussing some of the ways the human Services field has changed with the developmental disabilities. I am going to discuss ways it has changed from training classes that I have went to and learned from.

Back many many years ago, people with disabilities were looked at in a totally different way then they are today. Today individuals with developmental disabilities are taken very good care of and are watched very closely.

Back in the 1930s there was a place called Willowbrook that was built and was a state run facility for individuals with developmental disabilities. Willowbrook was in the Willowbrook neighborhood in Staten Island, NY. It was opened in the 1930s and closed in 1987. Willowbrook was originally designed for 4, 000 individuals but eventually in 1965 it had more than 6, 000 individuals. In 1965 it was the biggest state run facility for individuals with developmental disabilities. It was a very bad place for these individuals due to questionable medical practices and experiments. Sen. Robert Kennedy even called it a " snake pit". In the first decade that it was open individuals were getting hepatitis, it became very common. Most of the individuals developed some type of hepatitis within the first 6 months.

In 1965 when the population was over 6, 000 individuals Senator Robert Kennedy toured the facility. It was very overcrowded at this time with 2, 000 more individuals than the building was designed for. Senator Robert Kennedy gave some recommendations for improving the conditions after he seen they were " living in filth and dirt, their clothing in rags, in rooms less comfortable

and better than the cages in which we put animals in a zoo". Many of the individuals who lived there were abandoned by their families, foster care, and or other system agencies.

In 1972 Geraldo Rivera who was an investigative reporter in New York did some investigation. During his investigations he found "deplorable conditions". The deplorable conditions were "overcrowding, inadequate sanitary facilities, and physical and sexual abuse". Rivera then went onto the Dick Cavett Show and showed some film of individuals that lived at the school.

On March 17, 1972 a class action law-suit against New York State was filed in federal court. A settlement was not reached until May 5, 1975. It took several years before all of the violations were corrected. Due to the publicity of the case there is now a federal law called the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act of 1980.

In 1983 there were plans to close Willowbrook made by the the state of New York. In 1974 it was renamed Staten Island Developmental Center. By March 1986 the population was at 250. On September 17, 1987 the last individual left the facility.

While I was in a training class for my current job, we had to watch a video by Geraldo Rivera about Willowbrook. The conditions named above were so true but reading about it sounds good compared to actually seeing how these individuals actually had to live. Not only were these individuals already abandoned by their loved ones now they had to live in terrible conditions.