

mainly for seniors



Although blind, Mrs. Matilda Spinelli is able to mend clothing as SERVE volunteer at school for the retarded.

THE BLIND ARE USUALLY thought of as the recipients of social welfare services. But under a new program sponsored by the Community Service Society of New York, a group of courageous men and women are proving to the world and themselves that being blind is no barrier to helping others.

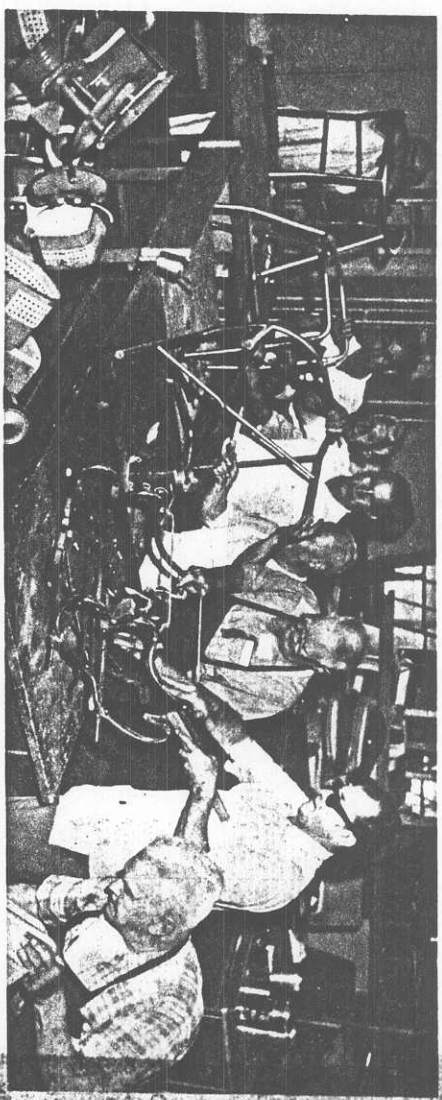
As volunteers, they are serving at the Willowbrook State School for retarded children on Staten Island; at Creedmoor State Hospital for the mentally ill in Queens Village; and at Syracuse Psychiatric Hospital and the Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse. Others are engaged in preparing materials for the American Red Cross at the Berry Houses Senior Center on Staten Island.

Since more than 50% of the blind in the United States are over 65, it isn't surprising that the average age of this unique band of volunteers is in the mid-60s. Like most seniors, they face a barrage of health and economic problems on top of their blindness. But as one woman put it, "I feel I am helping people who are worse off than myself."

What can these blind people do? Well, at Willowbrook several women mend clothes for the youngsters while male volunteers repair furniture in the school's fix-it shop. At Creed-

# The blind show the way

by JACK LEAHY



Joseph Cardona (dark glasses) is another blind volunteer who works beside sighted seniors in the repair shop of the Willowbrook State School on Staten Island. SERVE program is sponsored by the Community Service Society of New York.

moor, the blind act as "friendly visitors" and seek to draw out the mentally ill through conversation. They also lead patients in singing, dancing and games. One man teaches a rehabilitation class in ceramics. In Syracuse, volunteers stuff envelopes and do other clerical chores besides working with hospital patients.

"The volunteer idea has caught on with the blind and it is turning out extremely well," says Mrs. Janet Sainer, director of the CSS project. "Apart from their handicap, the blind are like other people... they vary in interests and abilities, and each has his special skills. As volunteers, they perform valuable services, contributing not only their talents, but also their warmth, concern and understanding."

Mrs. Sainer's project is an extension of SERVE (Serve and Enrich Retirement by Volunteer Experience), a program started by CSS in 1967. Since then, SERVE has enlisted more than 1,300 volunteers ranging in age from 60 to 95 for community activities throughout New York.

When the decision was made a few months ago to recruit blind volunteers, SERVE turned to a number of other agencies for assistance. The Lighthouse on Staten Island and in Syracuse; Vacations and Community Services for the Blind in New York City; the First Presby-

terian Church of Jamaica, which sponsors SERVE at Creedmoor; and the staffs of the various institutions to be served where all involved in planning.

Some special arrangements must be made, of course. A sighted senior volunteer is usually assigned to work with one or more blind volunteers, and transportation either by bus or taxi is provided for the blind. The only training that is required is a brief orientation talk and a tour of the facility.

"When I heard about this program," recalls 72-year-old Mrs. Wanda De Los Santos, "my first reaction was, 'They're feeling sorry for me. But I was told that the idea wasn't to help myself but to get me to do something for somebody else despite my own condition.'"

Max Greenberg, 55, had similar mixed feelings. A former aviation mechanic, he has been handicapped for nine years with partial vision and a paralyzed arm and leg.

"In the beginning," he says, "I had my doubts about volunteering, but I've changed my mind. 'The other day, I asked a patient (at Creedmoor) when she had last had visitors. She said she couldn't remember, it was so long ago. It really impressed me that I could be of help to that woman. It was fantastic!'"