

*200,000 retarded persons in public institutions to return to useful lives in the community."*

PRESIDENT RICHARD NIXON, Nov. 16, 1971

EVERY FEW YEARS, somebody opens a window for an airing of the zoo-like Willowbrooks of this country. Investigations are conducted, good men decry the evil that exists, and the institutionalized retarded receive a handout of public conscience money to relieve the hardships of their nightmarish lives. But after all the furor dies down, very little is ever accomplished to change the basic system that's responsible for these human warehouses.

Nobody is happy with the way things are. Not the parents, who gave up their children because they felt there was no other alternative, nor the institutional staff people, who receive low pay and considerable abuse for their failure to cope with an impossible task. And yet, everybody in the field of mental retardation agrees that something *can* be done, that in the vast majority of cases, something *must* be done to provide alternatives to institutionalization. It is equally indisputable that nearly all institutions have residents who don't belong in them. These people are quite capable of semi-independent living under minimal supervision—if such programs were available.

Up to now, however, thousands of higher-functioning retardates have eventually been forced by circumstances into an institutional environment where they frequently regressed to a more handicapped state. And regress or not, they contribute to the overcrowding which is the principal cause of the chaotic conditions that prevail in places like Willowbrook.

In recent years, a practical alternative to this seemingly inevitable process has emerged—the group home or hostel. Under this arrangement, small numbers of adult retardates with some self-help skills are able to live in a private residential atmosphere under the guidance of "house parents." For professionals sincerely trying to meet the needs of the retarded, for parents wondering what will become of a son or daughter after they are gone, the hostel has become the hope of the future.

"The hostel is the key we need," says Joseph T. Weingold, executive director of the N.Y. State Association for Retarded Children. "What's the sense of investing in community services like schools, vocational rehabilitation and sheltered workshops if we don't provide an adult retardate with a place to live?"

"There are thousands of individuals in institutions today, not because they are so severely retarded, but because there is no place where they can live in the community under some social supervision. If we abandon these individuals when their parents grow old or die,

they'll have to wind up in institutions . . . the Willowbrooks will have to be perpetuated."

In New York, a hostel program was made possible by legislation initiated in 1967. Thus far, however, there are only a dozen hostels scattered across the state. In socially "progressive" New York City, where there are approximately 240,000 retardates, only three hostels are currently in operation.

The first of these was Fineson House, a 27-room brownstone at 208 E. 16th St., which is sponsored by N.Y. City's chapter of the Association for the Help of Retarded Children (AHRC). Acquisition and renovation of the old building, the establishment of policies regarding its future use, and the selection of residents took the better part of three years. Finally opened on May 10, 1970, Fineson House is now a permanent home for 29 men and women who are employed in a nearby sheltered workshop or in private industry as messengers, clerks or maintenance help. A former Catholic priest and his wife act as house parents for the group.

In Brooklyn, the Guild for Exceptional Children operates a hostel for 10 men and women at 310 E. 67th St., where three Catholic nuns are serving as house parents. In Queens, the third hostel, with 23 residents, is maintained by the Young Adult Institute and Workshop at the Goodwill Terrace Apartments, 4-21 27th Ave. This hostel offers apartment-style living arrangements and social training with the goal of "graduating" residents to independence in their own apartments. Those who can't make it all the way are assured of a permanent place in the supervised structure of the hostel.

In Hempstead in suburban Nassau County, a former doctor's home and office at 536 Front St. has been converted to a hostel for seven male adult retardates. Operated by the local chapter of the Association for the Help of Retarded Children, it looks no different from other one-family residences on the block. Just like the others, the only sign on the door is the house number.

"This is a place to live, not an institution," says Mrs. Helen Kaplan, executive director of the Nassau County AHRC. "The seven young men are required to have jobs either at our own sheltered workshop or in private concerns. We don't want them hanging around the house all day long doing nothing.

"Our house parents follow a similarly normal routine. The 'mother' stays home, doing the shopping and cooking and general supervision of the way things are run. The 'father' is an evaluation technician in our sheltered workshop and he goes there every morning. We prefer it this way because we don't think a husband and wife should be together all the time. If they were, any tension that developed between them might be transferred to those in their charge."

To relieve the emotional and physical strain