

Islanders tops in city for opening their homes to retarded

By JOAN MOTYKA

"You've got to meet the community where it is," Al Robidoux, chief of Willowbrook State School's Community Services Unit, says.

In moving Willowbrook residents out of the state facility and into homes, apartments, jobs and families, the Community Services Unit (CSU) is attempting to "unbury" people who have been confined behind the walls of the institution for most of their lives.

The Staten Island community so far, has been very responsive to CSU projects. Foster homes have been made available, as well as jobs for ex-residents who are living on their own.

The reasons given for Staten Islanders opening their homes for foster care are many and varied, according to a CSU worker who concentrates on foster home placement.

Some Islanders want to give Willowbrook residents another way of living, others want children to live with their own offspring. Some are Willowbrook employes who are totally involved in their work; still others are ex-residents who want to give other Willowbrook residents the chances they had.

Most people interested in becoming foster parents want young children, and CSU is having difficulty in finding homes for severely retarded or multiply handicapped residents, and for adult men. The scope of the problem is immense — 80 per cent of Willowbrook's 4,200 residents are severely retarded and about 25 per cent are multiply handicapped.

CSU attempts to place Willowbrook residents in their home areas. Staten Island has the highest rate of family care homes for the retarded in the city.

"We have anti-institution operation here," Robidoux says of the CSU. "I don't think other boroughs aren't as receptive; maybe there are just no programs."

CONTRACTS USED

For foster care, homes must be found, inspected and licensed. A contract is signed, indicating Willowbrook's responsibilities: Payment of \$195 per month per resident, medical responsibilities, provision of clothing and continuing supervision of the resident and the family.

The family's responsibility is to provide a home-like atmosphere and to cooperate with the CSU staff and community resources in implementing a developmental plan.

Immediate goals of CSU workers involved in family care are to improve the follow-up provided for residents. This involves improvement in supervisory relationships as well as creation of a network of community resources that can be used by residents and families.

Community Status Employment is another program tied to foster care. In this program, residents support themselves, either with earned wages, or public assistance and social security payments, or a combination of the two.

They pay the foster parents for room and board and are considered further along the road to independent living.

The Job Development Team is another part of the CSU. The team finds jobs for residents and works with them to help them succeed, or arrange pre-vocational placements for those residents who are not currently employable.

Currently, approximately 80 residents are working and 50 are in vocational training. A major concern is the follow-up, and CSU is trying to develop ways of preventing people who have been placed in jobs from losing them.

In addition, CSU is trying to find more and different types of jobs so that more residents will be able to leave Willowbrook.

Many ex-residents are employed in jobs at Willowbrook. In this case, they must live off the grounds. For those living on their own, the transition to community living is a difficult one. CSU workers claim that, in their experience, much time must be spent in teaching ex-residents the fundamentals of housekeeping: How to shop, cook, pay bills, etc.

Another project of CSU is the Exodus Program in which residents are transferred to other facilities, helping them move a step closer in to the community.

More than 645 residents have been moved in this program. Recently, however, there has been a slowdown, since the other facilities are becoming filled.

REFERRAL SYSTEM

Willowbrook residents who are involved in any CSU projects must be referred by members of other units and by the Federal Grant Evaluation Team, which reviews all Willowbrook residents to counter problems of treatment and diagnosis.

Referral forms, indicating the skills of the resident and recommendations for placement, must be evaluated. Various placement teams operating within CSU then take over, in an attempt to