

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

give each resident individualized treatment.

Working with the individual and with the community is the major thrust of CSU. One of the major problems is that there is no existing network of community services on Staten Island or in the rest of the city.

The services needed include more classes for handicapped children, adult education programs for persons over 21 who have lower than 6th grade reading levels, medical, psychiatric and recreation services and vocational training.

There is a problem with public transportation also; it is difficult to use if a person is in a wheel chair. Steps in a school and in welfare offices, also pose problems for the physically handicapped.

"In trying to move people out of institutions, the state hasn't reordered policies with community services to accommodate the changes," Robidoux said. "We don't want to put people in the community and do them a disservice." CSU is in the process of contacting all Staten Island relatives of Willowbrook residents to discuss needs for services. More community input is required, however, to broaden the framework of needs.

Six areas of needs have been tentatively identified in the planning for creation and utilization of community resources.

The first is for group residences. CSU is working with interested in developing group public and private agencies in homes or hostels.

Another is for adult education and recreation. Many former residents express the need for a place to learn to talk to call their own.

A program of remedial work in adult education is lacking on Staten Island, CSU workers claim. Most existing adult

education programs require that the student have at least a 6th grade reading level, and when ex-Willowbrook residents don't, they have no access to the programs.

A CSU team is now working with community groups for a joint program in adult education, but this is still in the planning stage.

Public education is another problem that faces the handicapped. Since the total number of Island handicapped children is not known providing special education for them is difficult. CSU hopes for the creation of a registry of all handicapped children which would be invaluable in negotiating with schools for planning services.

CSU also recognizes the problem of healthcare for the handicapped. Although almost all community residents are covered by Medicaid, Medicare or private insurers, CSU claims that "having coverage and receiving treatment are not synonymous."

Part of the problem is diagnosis, another is treatment. By a program of community outreach, CSU hopes to remedy both.

United Cerebral Palsy mini-teams are beginning to consult with CSU on ways of improving services in foster homes and to handicapped persons in the community.

Two mobile vans will bring teams of professionals to different areas of Staten Island and in some cases diagnosis and treatment will be given immediately. The thrust will be on teaching, however.

Through this, CSU hopes to

spread information and get ideas from larger segments of the population.

Socialization and sex education is another recognized problem, and CSU sees Willowbrook as the "logical" place to begin tackling it. Residents meeting with their peers is a major need "that cannot be overestimated." What is needed are ways to accomplish this through all community placements.

An important aspect of CSU work is follow-up. By helping ex-residents adjust to "life on the outside" and assisting them in all stages of adjustment, CSU is working against the fear that people may not make it on the outside any better than in Willowbrook.

(Third in a series)