

Retardation expert asks small care units

By JAMES SUPINA

A nationally known specialist in the field of mental retardation last night warned large custodial institutions for the mentally handicapped only serve to perpetuate the "myth" that some people cannot be educated and should be secluded from society.

Presenting his case for smaller care units for the retarded geared toward their integration into society, Dr. Burton Blatt criticized the state Department of Mental Hygiene, members of his own profession, and the general concept of retardation itself, during a presentation at a forum on special education in Susan Wagner High School.

Taking aim at the Department of Hygiene's construction program, which presently calls for the erection of 10 new custodial buildings in the next few years, Blatt charged the state with failing to develop the capabilities of the retarded in a way that "the Bible, every moral instinct and human responsibility tells us we should."

"By secluding those who

society feels unable to function in the mainstream like the retarded and the senior citizen," he said, "we only prepare a place where we may be secluded if our time comes."

Retardation as determined through the use of IQ scores, he claimed has not real scientific substance.

Noting that standards of mental competency have varied greatly through the years, Blatt said that psychologists at a recent conference had "voted" to lower the IQ score that allegedly constitutes retardation.

As a result of this decision, he joked, a substantial proportion of people who had been considered mentally handicapped were "miraculously cured."

Asserting that society's recognition of the "retarded" as citizens deserving the best possible education is the only key to solving the "problelem" of the handicapped, the psychologist stressed that legislation alone could never bring an answer.

Instead of establishing systems to keep the retarded

in confinement, he explained, programs that show belief in every individual's ability to learn must be designed.

Taking the example of Helen Keller, who overcame her handicaps to become a world famous celebrity, Blatt asked the audience what would have become of her without a dedicated teacher.

"You might believe that she wasn't really mentally retarded, but did it ever occur to you that she was, until someone who cared set out to change her?" he asked.

Blatt is presently director of special education at the rehabilitation center of human policy at Syracuse University.

Other forum speakers included Dr. Helen M. Fuelner, executive director of the office of special education of the city Board of Education; Miss Carolyn M. Heft, managing attorney of the law reform unit of Mobilization for Youth Legal Services; David Riley, a doctoral candidate in special education administration; and Dr. Daniel Ringelhiem, deputy assistant commissioner of special education in New Jersey.