

How one community met halfway house

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Sixty years ago the street was made of cobblestone. Hitching posts stood in front of 15-room mansions. Tall, graceful trees lined the block. It was, one resident, said, the finest block in Spring Valley, N.Y.

Today, the 15-room mansions and the tall trees still remain. But the street is paved and the hitching posts are gone. South Madison Ave. is a different block.

Professional offices for at least six lawyers, three doctors and an optometrist, a library, a church and a temple have taken over many of the stately homes.

Wedge in between the bustling business, however, unnoticed, almost somnolent, are two halfway houses for 14 mentally retarded adults.

"They are just like any other houses on the block," says Peter White, 26, who has lived for the past year next door to one of the halfway houses.

"The biggest problem we've had," says Mrs. Lillian Schwartz, who has lived on South Madison Ave. for 59 years, "was three years ago when the state didn't cut the grass in front of the house. But I sent a letter and it's been cut ever since."

Despite community opposition and trepidation at the outset, the two state Department of Mental Hygiene-operated halfway houses on South Madison Ave. are now integral, accepted parts of the Spring Valley community.

Advance interviews with neighbors, town officials, and facility supervisors reveal that the two halfway houses have operated for four years without a serious incident. There have been no assaults by halfway house residents, no incidents of violence.

Essentially, the halfway houses have bred no serious problems for the town of Spring Valley.

That finding is particularly significant now with the Department of Mental Hygiene planning to put two halfway houses for the mentally retarded on Staten Island. One is slated to begin operation in

late spring at 290 Tysen St., New Brighton.

Many community residents have been upset about what they consider the surreptitious manner in which the Department of Mental Hygiene purchased the Tysen St. house. Others have voiced fears about potential aggressive or violent behavior on the part of the halfway house's residents.

The experience at the two Spring Valley facilities would seem to belie those fears.

"We have never had any problem," Adam Krainak, chief of Spring Valley police, told the Advance. "Our experience has been good in total. They are very courteous, very thrifty people. We've never had any complaints of any nature."

Coordinator Richard Ingaglio says that "the community doesn't even know we are here." Ingaglio says that there has been "next to zero incidence" of halfway house residents "hitting or hurting other people."

If anything, Ingaglio says, the residents would hurt themselves, perhaps by scratching an arm. As for the community, he says, "they're not really bothering anybody."

Ingaglio admitted, however, that the four-year halfway house program has not been "all roses." The major problem has centered around the women living in one of the houses.

The houses are on opposite sides of South Madison Ave. One houses seven men, one seven women. The Tysen St.

house will be a co-ed facility.

Ingaglio says that some of the women tend to "act out sexually, draw attention to themselves" in public, and, at times, get picked up by men for sexual encounters.

"Some girls go out and overdo it," Ingaglio admits. "We've had complaints — girls called prostitutes, this called a whorehouse. Their encounters, however, are no different than those of other women."

Ingaglio said that there has never been a case of child molestation or assault of any type. There have been some incidents of community residents assaulting the retarded, he said.

In general, however, Ingaglio said, the community has been responsive to the needs of the residents. "We have a pretty good relationship in the neighborhood. Once the residents saw what we were all about, they accepted us."

"We've seen some really nice things happen in this community," Ingaglio said. He cited one family on South Madison Ave. who vehemently opposed the halfway houses on their block. Once the family saw the residents, however, they changed their tune.

"They sort of adopted some of the residents," staff member Donald Williams said. "The kids got along so well we had to go down to the house and dig them out."

Ingaglio feels that community cooperation is vital to the halfway house. The residents, he says, have enough problems coping "inside" the house without pressure from the outside.

The Spring Valley facilities have had a 95 per cent rate of success, with 45 mentally retarded adults living there and then moving to the community, some unsupervised. Three former residents are now married.

Robert Gang, the psychologist who will be director of the Tysen St. halfway house, says that he does not know what will happen if the New Brighton and surrounding community attempts to kill the project.

"The community is afraid of the unknown . . . everywhere," Williams said last week, sitting in a living room at one Spring Valley facility. "Once we opened we couldn't keep the kids out of their houses. They loved them."