

Halfway house: Fumbling and...

How does a 10-bed, precedent-setting halfway house for the mentally retarded find its way into a swanky Staten Island neighborhood with virtually no community input?

A re-creation of the events leading up to the purchase by the Department of Mental Hygiene of a two-story house at 200 Tysen St., New Brighton, reveals a comedy of errors and a breakdown in communication between community and government.

The scorecard reads like this:

- The Department of Mental Hygiene fails to touch base with Tysen St. residents and fails to get approvals from the necessary city and borough agencies.

- The Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disability Council approves the concept, not the site, but never informs the community board—officially or unofficially—where the halfway house will be located.

- The Borough President's office approves the concept, but then sends representatives from the Department of Mental Hygiene to the wrong community board.

- Community Board 2 listens to a conceptual presentation on the halfway house, but, apparently getting no specific proposal for a site, tucks the information away and fails to act until the house has been purchased.

The implications of the Tysen St. communications boondoggle are vital at this point. There is no evidence of any covert, surreptitious action by the state Department of Mental Hygiene.

But the process will be repeated. Three more halfway houses for the retarded are planned for Staten Island. It is estimated that there is a need for at least 34 community facilities for the retarded.

"It would be crazy for us to try and hide anything," says

Albert Robidoux, director of community services for Willowbrook Developmental Center.

"We do want people to know," emphasizes Peter Knauss, assistant director, bureau of functional programming, for the Department of Mental Hygiene.

Why, then, did an apparently innocuous attempt to purchase and open a halfway house for 12 mildly retarded men and women precipitate a furious community outburst?

Why then is legal action by the North Shore ad hoc coalition to examine planning of health-related facilities aimed at stopping the takeover of the halfway house a "real possibility" in the near future?

A chronological look at the events leading up to the purchase give some of the answers to a problem that is potentially a major solution to overcrowding and dehumanization at Willowbrook.

An Advance investigation reveals that the story begins in July 1972 when top officials in the Department of Mental Hygiene make a policy decision to give top priority to the development of community facilities.

In February 1974 Mental Hygiene's James Boothbay brings the halfway house proposal and tentative site to Deputy Borough President Ralph Lamberti. "I supported the concept," Lamberti says now. "They said they had a site in mind. And I said they should have community support."

Lamberti says that he was told that Tysen St. was "under consideration." Lamberti says he did not want to get involved in site selection, that that was up to the community boards.

Lamberti "was quite aware of the site," says Knauss from his Albany office. "It would be crazy not to give the address," Robidoux repeated.

Clearly, Lamberti knew the site. Clearly, the Department of Mental Hygiene was well advanced in its plans to purchase 200 Tysen St. According to a department spokesman, the house owner, Frank Salvatore, had contacted the state's Bureau of Real Property about acquisition by the state in September 1973.

The state inspected the house, the spokesman said, in October and gave a preliminary approval. Salvatore was in the process of building his own house and asked for a delay in the purchase. The state gave its OK while it attempted to apprise all the necessary community and governmental agencies.

Nevertheless, Lamberti took Boothbay and Robert Gang, a Willowbrook psychologist who will supervise the facility, before Community Board 1. The board was given the concept and tentative site. Tysen St., however, was not in Board 1's jurisdiction.

From there Al Robidoux presented the concept to the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disability Council, a citizen-expert monitoring group.

Robidoux is convinced that the council gave its approval. "We told them the address of the house," Robidoux says. "And I could swear they gave us approval."

Mrs. Beatrice Victor, the council chairman, however, says that "we supported the concept," but Robidoux gave only a "superficial proposal." Mrs. Victor says the council asked for more information. Robidoux says that request came some time subsequent to his initial meeting.

Mrs. Victor says the council was aware of the site, but that it was only interested in the conceptual-clinical data about the halfway house. The council voted approval only this Friday.

Next came Boothbay's presentation to Community Board 2. The state—legally—did not have to get the board's approval or support. It was a courtesy, community gesture.

Boothbay is sure that he told Board 2 just where they were planning to open the halfway house. Conversations with board leadership brings a different opinion.

"The site was never mentioned," Chairman Georg Olsen says. "We were never asked for anything. I didn't know of the site before the Building Department let us know (in August '74).

"I think 'hey (Mental Hygiene) made an honest error,'" Olsen says. "The ball was dropped somewhere. They may have wrongly assumed we knew about it."

It was a logical assumption since, seemingly, everyone else did know the location.

By Aug. 24, when board member Ernst Bendix sent a letter to Knauss stating that the board had approved no halfway house, the house was already purchased. The community board had taken no action, despite an Advance report on July 9 that approval for purchase of the house was only about four weeks away.

The Department of Mental Hygiene, feeling it has gotten approvals all along the line, was shocked when in November the community was up in arms about the Tysen St. facility.

"The concept is good. It probably does work, but it was done haphazardly," says Mrs. Sarah Holzka, the catalyst for the North Shore coalition, a citizen group composed of civic group leaders. "At this point we don't want it in the neighborhood."

"They didn't even have the courtesy to knock on doors," says Larry Rottersman who lives at 182 Tysen St. "Suddenly the character of the neighborhood is being changed. A radical change. The state has been unfeeling," he charges.

"It's an enormous threat to our children," says Mrs. Holzka who has two 13-year-old daughters.

What will the coalition do?

Legal action is a "real possibility," Rottersman says. "We're interested in the process of procurement. We wonder if it is not a fit subject for investigation."

What does Willowbrook intend to do?

"We still want to go into it," Robidoux says, adding that he is hoping to develop a community advisory committee for the Tysen St. halfway house.

And if the community can successfully kill the halfway house—a remote possibility, at this point—what would happen?

"If this doesn't work we'll try another," says Robidoux. "It would be a black eye for the professionals. But it would really be a defeat for the residents who are caught in the middle. The retarded need this house."

And for the future. Will it be different the next time around?

Robidoux says his people "will knock on doors." Knauss says that it is not state policy to go door to door. That will have to be resolved.

Could the community board miss the next halfway house? Yes, unless a liaison with the Regional Retardation Council is established and unless communication between the Borough President's office and the boards is improved.

As for the community, the fears are certainly still evident and complex and justified. There are still unanswered questions.

Only education and improved public relations by the Department of Mental Hygiene can allay the legitimate fears of community residents. And only two-way communication—among community members, community boards and state agencies—can prevent a future fiasco.

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