

Halfway house possibility to be aired by health unit

By ROBERT MIRALDI

The North Richmond Community Mental Health Center will discuss the concept of a halfway house for mentally ill persons at a meeting tomorrow night of the Staten Island Mental Health Council, it has been learned.

A spokesman for North Richmond said yesterday that the possibility of a halfway house is "just a topic of conversation" at this point and that "no active proposal" has been made.

"By no means are we moving ahead or do we have funding," the spokesman, Eric Feldman, said in response to inquiries.

Mrs. Roberta Imre, chairman of the mental health council, confirmed that the halfway house is on the group's agenda, but, Mrs. Imre said, "we assume that North Richmond is just laying some groundwork" for the future.

The North Richmond spokesman said that no details were available on the halfway house and that no site had even been discussed by center officials.

There are presently no halfway houses or group homes or any sort on Staten Island for persons with psychiatric disorders.

There are two group homes or the retarded being developed in New Brighton, including the controversial 200 Tysen St. home to be run by a parents group for ex-residents of Willowbrook Developmental Center.

The Tysen St. group home is slated to open—initially as a family living-skills training center—in March after renovations are completed on the two-story, wood-frame building.

Talk of a halfway house for the mentally ill comes as no surprise to mental health observers here. The trend in mental health care has clearly been away from institutionalization and toward smaller, transitional facilities.

Conceptually, a halfway house is a bridge—between life in the institution and independent living in the community. "A halfway house tries to approximate a normal family unit," says Ronnie Harmon of the city Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation Services.

According to Ms. Harmon, there are five halfway houses for the mentally ill in the city, two in Manhattan and one each in Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx. The facilities in the other boroughs, however, are large facilities—200 beds in Brooklyn—while the Island halfway house is expected to accommodate under 15 residents.

Statewide, there are about 10 halfway houses for psychiatric patients, says a spokesman for the Department of Mental Hygiene. Those 10 are run in conjunction with state psychiatric centers.

In a recent interview, Dr. Arnold Winston, director of the state's South Beach Psychiatric Center, which provides the Island's mental health care along with North Richmond, endorsed the concept of small halfway house but said South Beach had no plans at present to develop such a facility.

The North Richmond Community Mental Health Center, however, is in a different position than South Beach. North Richmond is mandated by recent federal legislation to develop—within two years, on source said yesterday—a halfway house or similar transi-

tional facility.

If the halfway house is not developed, the source said, the center would lose some federal funding.

Last month, the federal Health, Education and Welfare Department announced it had allotted \$1,003,944 to the state for the development of transitional facilities. Nationally about \$20 million has been allotted, a paltry sum, some officials say, and certainly not enough to start a halfway house.

Mental health officials interviewed yesterday said that at this point North Richmond "has nothing more than a concept," but, they said, it is a concept "whose time has come."

The officials said that presently there are three viable options for persons with psychiatric disorders: Institutionalization, a day treatment program or large homes for adults.

The halfway house, they said, would fulfill a dual need—a sheltered, supervised environment (normalization) as well as enforced therapy.

Halfway house residents are usually employed in sheltered workshops or attend day treatment therapy sessions.

According to Ms. Harmon, at a halfway house program in Buffalo, after which the Transitional Services program in Queens is modeled, 90 per cent of the clients did not return to

an institution after living in the halfway house. The normal recidivism rate, she said, is about 50 per cent.

For the past three years North Richmond has conducted, without incident, a satellite apartment program where clients were aided in finding apartments in which they would live after receiving independent living skills training. The halfway house would differ since it would have a live-in staff members.