

Transportation for retarded urged

Connelly, state aides tour mental health facilities

By ROBERT MIRALDI

"The city can spend millions on Yankee Stadium and we can't get money to fund transportation for the retarded and handicapped population of Staten Island?"

"Priorities somewhere have to be changed," Robert M. Piegari, assistant administrator of the Staten Island Center for Developmental Disabilities, said yesterday as he led state and Staten Island officials on a tour of eight Island mental health facilities.

The touring entourage included Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, Department of Mental Hygiene Deputy Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin and Donald Hanson of the state's Bureau of Developmental Disability Services.

Piegari along with Richard Surpin of the Staten Island Community Corp. made no pretense about the purpose of the afternoon-long tour: To convince state officials of the "desperate" need for transportation money.

"Some of our kids," said Mrs. Beatrice Victor, chairman of the Staten Island Regional Retardation Council,

"are just sitting at home at night and staring at TV. They need transportation to obtain socialization."

And if the state cooperates, the transportation can become a reality by the fall when a federal grant of about \$72,000 will have allowed the Staten Island Community Corp. to purchase seven eight-passenger vans to transport the handicapped to the approximate 30 Island sites which provide educational and vocational training.

"The seven transportation vans will allow us to meet the most critical needs of the handicapped," explained Surpin, who was instrumental with Piegari in getting the federal money.

The problem now — and the reason why the whole transportation deal could fall through — is that operational money, originally promised by the city, is no longer available.

The city Office of the Aging and the city Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation Services had pledged to put up the approximate \$150,000 annual operational money the mini-bus system

would need.

Furthermore, Surpin says, numerous non-profit foundations were interested in providing money, assuming that a stable annual money grant could be guaranteed. The city fiscal crunch entered the picture and the 150G went down the drain.

Yankee Stadium will open this spring, however, as Piegari notes. "We're certainly not doing the best we can for our retarded population," he said.

With the Willowbrook Developmental Center consent de-

creed in the process of implementation, sending eventually 200 Staten Island residents into residence in the community, the transportation of the handicapped will become more of a problem.

Linda Carelli, a community service worker at Willowbrook, says many of the center's retarded residents are presently in foster care homes are "caught in the middle—with programs to go to with no way to get there."

In May, she explains, the Island's first group home for the retarded at 200 Tysen St., New

Brighton, will begin operation as a training center for Willowbrook residents. "I'm not sure how the residents will get there," Ms. Carelli says.

And once the facility opens in January 1977 as a 24-hour halfway house, how will the residents travel to community-based vocational programs? "That's a good question," she says.

Dominic Pirraglia, director of the Occupational Training Center in Rosebank, a stop on the tour, says, "I'm sure there are kids who are not coming here because of the lack of

transportation."

He pointed to the South Shore of the Island where potential clients would have to take three buses to reach the Rosebank school. "Their so-called normal counterparts wouldn't take three buses to go to a school, why should the handicapped?"

"There is a lost population out there," Pirraglia says.

Surpin and Piegari hope that Coughlin and Hanson were convinced enough yesterday to push for the money which can help the "lost population find its way back into society."



Willowbrook Community Services worker Linda Carelli (left), chats with Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly (center) and Department of Mental Hygiene Deputy Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin (right).