

7 Mental Health Agencies

Ready to Fight Fund Cuts

By MARY ENGELS

Staten Island's seven voluntary mental health agencies, waiting to see how the city allocates its funds, are mustering their forces for a possible fight in the event of new budget cuts.

At a gathering called recently in the office of the Staten Island Mental Health Society in West Brighton, members of the seven agencies expressed concern about how to tackle the problem.

Roberta Imbre, chairman of the Staten Island



The slide is an experience in direction for this young man in a recreational workshop at Staten Island Aid for the Retarded Center

Mental Health Council, said: "The fat is already trimmed. How can you cut the bone?"

"The difficulty," she said, "is knowing the places to go to effectively plead your case for preserving the services."

The agencies include Staten Island Hospital's psychiatric outpatient clinic, the Staten Island Mental Health Society's Children's Community Center, and the Staten Island Center for Developmental Disabilities at Wagner College.

Also, the North Richmond Community Mental Health Center and its alcoholism program, which is under the jurisdiction of St. Vincent's Medical Center of Richmond; the Staten Island Aid for the Retarded, a day school for children, and the United Cerebral Palsy program at the South Beach Psychiatric Center.

Some of the programs have been in existence for only a year or two and to cut back now would be disastrous, program officials feel.

His Sentiments Exactly

Dr. Lawrence Miller, who heads the alcoholism program at the North Richmond Center, said: "Last year the program provided services for 300 patients for a total of 3,000 visits. This year we expected to reach 5,300 visits. There is no question that any significant reduction in funding would reduce the quality of patient care."

Miller's sentiments were echoed by John Miller (no relation), head of Staten Island Hospital, whose psychiatric outpatient clinic handled 250 patients last year with a total of 4,000 visits.

In operation about seven years, the clinic almost had to close last July but received a nine-month contract and then an extension to June 30.

"After June 30, if there are no funds in sight we will have to go on a day-to-day operation and hope for the best," said Miller.

Joan Hodum, director of the Staten Island Aid for Retarded Children, said she already had cut down on the recreational services and halted the Saturday program.

"I am making contingency plans to see how much further we can go," she said. "But I tell you I will be in there fighting for the money for these kids to keep the center going."

Fear the Domino Effect

All told, the Island programs serve some 24,000 people and, after absorbing a 20% cut last June, now get \$1.335 million in city funds.

Loss of more city money, according to the mental health people would have a domino effect, chopping state and federal matching funds that depend on city money.

The state's deputy commissioner for mental retardation, Thomas Coughlin 3d, who was appointed acting director for Willowbrook Development Center, commented last week that \$5 million in state money was set aside for employment and services at Willowbrook.

"It seems crazy that on one hand we have this money in the budget to hire more people at Willowbrook when, on the other hand, we are really under commitment to reduce the population there by getting them back into the community."

"This money would make better sense going towards community programs," he said.

That is a statement the affected agencies would agree with.

The Staten Island and Brooklyn regional director for the New York City Department of Mental Health, Paul Cooper, said: "We are meeting with all the various agencies to evaluate their programs before reaching any decisions."

The mayor had ordered a 20% cut in the city's mental health and retardation programs, for a total of \$9.18 million. And it is up to the department to see who gets what.