

Program for retarded falling short of goal

By ROBERT MIRALDI
(Last of a series)

The window of Barbara Blum's office on the 57th floor of the World Trade Center looks north into Manhattan. It is a breathtaking view. Ironically, the view gives Barbara Blum a chance each day to look at the problem that faces her and the staff of the Metropolitan Placement Unit.

In Manhattan, as well as in the communities of the city's other four boroughs, you can look all you want but you just can't find adequate services to take care of the needs of the city's retarded population.

"There is an absolute scarcity of resources," says Mrs. Blum, director of the five-month-old state unit whose job is to find community residences for 4,137 former and present residents of Willowbrook Developmental Center.

Lack of resources is just one of the difficulties faced by the Metropolitan Placement Unit (MPU), although it is perhaps the most serious.

"They've got so many hurdles," says one high-level source in the Department of Mental Hygiene. "You can be sure of this: Barbara Blum will earn her \$48,814 salary."

In order to succeed, the Metropolitan Placement Unit must overcome the state's history of dumping disabled persons, the non-existence of a placement model, the lack of community resources, the community's fear of the retarded, the city and state fiscal crisis

For a look at Daphne's "homecoming" and at the efforts to provide more foster care on the Island, see Sandra Zummo's story today on Page 17.

and countless bureaucratic obstacles.

"I've never been so frightened," Mrs. Blum says, half-joking, half-serious.

And well she and her staff should be a bit frightened. The MPU is attempting to do what has never been done in New York City: Develop a series of community residences with a concurrent service network to insure that retarded people are not "dumped" from institutions.

"We're all on new ground," admits

Karen Eriksen, MPU's deputy director. Thus far, the Metropolitan Placement Unit has gotten rave reviews from mental hygiene observers. "If it can be done," Alan Saperstein of the U.S. Health, Education and Welfare Department says, "I'm told Barbara Blum can do it."

Whether it can be done, however, is the question. The population remaining at Willowbrook is, for the most part, severely retarded and multiply handicapped. Philosophically, the bureaucracy is just coming to grips with the idea that severely retarded persons can make progress.

That idea still does not sit well in many quarters. For example, Dr. Rangasamy Natarajan, the former clinical director at Willowbrook, calls the state's placement plans "hogwash." Dr. Natarajan says that 1,029 present Willowbrook residents are "totally and physically handicapped" and need "total custodial care." They could not function in the community, he says.

According to Department of Mental Hygiene statistics, 679 Willowbrook residents are severely retarded (IQ 20 to 35) and 1,523 profoundly retarded (IQ below 20). Albert Robidoux, the former director of community services at Willowbrook who is now a state employe in upstate Wilton (N.Y.) Center, was intimately associated with those residents.

"Anybody can be placed in the community," Robidoux says, adding: "Providing there are support services."

Robidoux says that there has "to be real genuine personal commitment on the part of the state. The community can't do it alone. The staff must follow and there must be a real personalized commitment—to people, not numbers."

The numbers game has entered the placement picture, however. By last spring, the MPU was given a deadline by a federal court decree to place 200 residents. The unit fell almost 50 placements short. "I thought I had it," Mrs. Blum says.

Appearing in court, Mrs. Blum made

no excuses for not meeting the 200 level but promised to make 600 more placements by next June. "I'm lagging badly," she says about current progress.

Sixty placements a month, she says, "seemed reasonable." In March there were 34 placements; in April, 32; in May, 8; in June, 17; in July, 9 and in August 30. For September, Mrs. Blum expects 40 placements.

Money has not been a problem since the placement unit has a "liberal" purchase of service of contract mechanism. If a service is not available, the state can go out and purchase it for a resident about to be placed. But only if the service now exists.

"Frankly," Mrs. Blum says, "I'm desperate for certain kinds of services in the community. We've examined the existing agencies and look to expand their services."

But, she says, Brooklyn "has very great deficits;" the Bronx has a lack of residential services; Manhattan has no family care or foster homes.

On Staten Island, where 174 Island residents now at Willowbrook will have to be placed, Mrs. Blum sees the "opportunity to develop services as we would like." There is no urgency here, she says, helped in part because Islanders have taken in large numbers of retarded persons for foster care.

About community opposition, which was evident in the state's eventual successful operation of a group home on Tysen St., New Brighton, Mrs. Blum says: "We have to try to communicate the importance of caring for human beings. But if we are being kept out, the courts have to be used."

The "startup period" that the placement unit is now going through is the toughest time, according to Mrs. Blum, who worked as a high-level city official developing group homes for children.

Mrs. Blum estimates that it will take 10 to 12 months to get the placement effort "really rolling." People are wary of the Department of Mental Hygiene's history of dumping, and credibility says Mrs. Blum, "is a very great problem."

If Barbara Blum comes near making 600 placements by next summer, the credibility problem will begin to disappear, services in the community will hopefully begin to appear and the state's big problem then will be to follow up and monitor the placements.