

Lack of \$\$ halts bus service for the handicapped, elderly

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Dan Andersen is 75 years old and he has been living on Staten Island, on and off, for more than 50 years. He was a seaman and worked for years on freighters that traveled the world.

Dan Andersen is living now in the Eger Home in Egbertville. He is spry, active and alert. He thinks nothing of taking a daily stroll for three, four or five miles.

Last week, in fact, the Norwegian-born Andersen strolled three miles along winding, treacherous Manor Rd. to Westerleigh to the home of relatives. From there, he walked another mile to a barber shop.

"This hair is getting too long," he said, pointing to short gray hair that, in his mind, was making him look like a "hippie."

Andersen trudged to a Port Richmond barber shop that offers senior citizens cuts for \$1.25. By the time he reached the shop it was 3:30 p.m. He was tired and worried. He still had to go to a pharmacy and then catch public transportation back to Eger Home.

The day's commotion and activity had tired him; the apprehension of catching a bus and getting back to Eger in time for dinner had him worried. "Gosh," he said, rubbing his brow and looking at his watch, "I wish the bus was here now."

On this day last week Dan Andersen was spared some of his anxiety. A friend happened by and drove Andersen back to Eger Home.

Using conservative state figures, there are almost 30,000 Dan Andersens on Staten Island — senior citizens who, like the general population, have places to go, things to do, but have no convenient transportation.

Unlike Andersen, most senior citizens have difficulty walking to bus stops, let alone walking three miles. Andersen walks the three miles because, on nice days, he likes the exercise but also because he has no other choice. He would rather ride a bus on many days.

The irony of the situation is that the

Staten Island Community Corp. now has seven 12-passenger buses on hand. The buses are supposed to provide daily transportation for Staten Island elderly and handicapped population.

The buses will make an estimated 100,000 trips a year... if and when money is ever found to pay for the 10 bus drivers and three clerical workers needed to run the program.

"I have to think that money is available somewhere," says Robert Piegari, an Island mental health administrator who has been instrumental in the purchase of the vans, which were bought with a \$113,000 state grant.

The question is: Who has the money? Not the city's Department of Employment, says Mrs. Lucille Rose, commissioner of the agency, which has been doling out money under the federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA).

The Staten Island Community Corp. has applied for CETA money Nov. 19 and it is still hoping that discretionary federal funds might become available to get the bus program off the ground.

Mrs. Rose explains, however, that whatever discretionary money has been available — "and it hasn't been much" — has been going toward emergency-plagued areas, like snowbound Buffalo. Despite the Nov. 19 letter, Mrs. Rose was not aware of the Island bus project and requested more information to re-evaluate the corporation's request.

The corporation received CETA funding last summer and trained 13 drivers, but when the money ran out the drivers had to be let go. Result: 13 trained drivers who couldn't be paid.

Last week the corporation had to scrape up money to pay insurance fees for the buses, says corporation director

Harold Greene. "The red tape and obstacles are unbelievable," Greene adds.

This week corporation officials are to meet with Transit Authority officials to map daily schedules and routes for the buses. Eger Home is expected to be on the route, along with other health-care facilities, senior citizen centers and various workshops for the handicapped.

According to recent state reports, the buses are desperately needed at the Willowbrook Developmental Center, where the state is attempting to integrate the center's population into community life at workshops and day centers.

Thus far, because of the limited public transportation opportunities, most of the center's 2,595 residents have had to stay on the grounds and have been denied many of the community's benefits.

Additionally, there are an estimated 8,000 developmentally disabled Island residents living in homes with relatives, and most are unable to attend social and occupational workshops because of the lack of transportation.

Greene feels that a six-month grant would pay for the drivers and enable the program to generate its own income. The problem is to get the six-month grant.