

# Future of Willowbrook's group home remains unsettled

By ROBERT MIRALDI



This big house on the Willowbrook Developmental Center grounds formerly housed the center's director. Soon it will be the site of a halfway house for center residents.

S.I. Advance Photos by Frank J. Johns



Willowbrook staff member Melanie Adams helps a smiling resident, Robert, learn to make a salad — part of the program's daily living skills training.

Three years after the state has purchased a New Brighton house and prepared it as a group home for eight Willowbrook Developmental Center residents, the two-story frame building remains vacant and the project is beset with difficulties.

The latest snag in the attempt to open 200 Tysen St. as a group home for Staten Islanders at Willowbrook is the sudden discovery that despite \$27,000 worth of renovations to the \$64,000 house, modernization of kitchen and bathroom areas are still needed.

Further complicating the issue is approval needed from Community Board 1 before the group home can open. Planners of the project expect to meet with leaders of the newly constituted board this week.

The home was purchased by the state Department of Mental Hygiene in July 1974, and the state intended to operate it as a halfway house — a transitional facility — for 10 to 12 retarded residents of Willowbrook.

Opposition developed in the surrounding New Brighton community, however,

and a stormy fight ensued, including a heated confrontation at a community meeting. The community finally approved a two-phase proposal for 200 Tysen St.

The first phase, which was to have begun in the winter of 1976, was a year-long training program to teach the Willowbrook residents daily living skills — shopping, laundry, cooking, personal hygiene, household cleaning. That training was to be done on a 9 a.m.-to-5 p.m. basis at Tysen St.

The second phase, assuming all went well with the training and that the community as well as the Willowbrook residents adapted, was to be the live-in phase. Tysen St. would have 24-hour, on-the-premises staff to supervise its residents.

The renovations at Tysen St. went slowly, however, and the first phase was delayed. By this time the Tysen St. project had changed its scope a bit.

The state no longer runs the program. It is ostensibly administered by the Willowbrook Benevolent Society, a parents'

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group, with the state paying for a staff. Secondly, Tysen St. is no longer a transitional facility but will be a permanent residence for eight, not 12, Willowbrook residents.

What didn't change in the move toward opening the Tysen St. group home — the first of its kind on Staten Island — was the need to train Willowbrook residents in daily living skills. About a year ago the state initiated a Training Adults for Community Living (TACL) program on the Willowbrook grounds.

TACL did at Willowbrook what was supposed to have taken place at Tysen St. — train people for day-in, day-out living. Thus far 15 persons have gone through the TACL program and seven have "graduated."

"Those people are ready for life in the community," Diane Whyte, hostel coordinator for the benevolent society, says.

Mrs. Whyte and Diane Buglioli, director of the TACL program, both marvel at the progress the Willowbrook residents have made. They point to small things. Like, says Ms. Buglioli, one resident who would point to a table and say "book."

That same resident after a short period will say, "The book is on the table." Language development is important, they stress.

"Much of the progress can't be put on paper," Ms. Buglioli says. "But we've seen the residents round out as people. We've eliminated the bland institutional behavior in many cases."

The TACL workers feel they have accomplished their goal with the prospective Tysen St. residents — they have prepared them for life in the community. Does that fulfill the desire of the community board in its original agreement with the benevolent society, however?

The original agreement was for the Willowbrook residents as well as New Brighton residents to adjust to each other. The TACL workers contend that the Willowbrook residents are mingling in the community every day — taking buses to Tysen St.; having lunch at the house; shopping at neighborhood stores;



Willowbrook residents Herbie, sitting, and Joel, right, are taught by staffer Ray Coleman how to iron their clothes. S.I. Advance Photo by Frank J. Johns

visiting the police station and the hospital.

Mrs. Whyte says she is flexible in what she will propose to the community board this week. She would like to be able to begin the live-in phase as soon as renovations are completed. The community board might want to start with the one-year training phase first. That would be a setback, she feels, but she concedes that a six-month training period might be a useful compromise.

When Tysen St. does open, training at Willowbrook will not cease, however.

The TACL program will continue for other non-Staten Island residents targeted for community placement. The large house on the Willowbrook grounds that formerly housed the center's director, in fact, will be turned into a second training site and will serve as a 24-hour group home within a few months.

The residents trained in the director's house will then, presumably, follow the 335 former residents of Willowbrook who have already been placed in community facilities throughout New York City.