

By ROBERT MIRALDI

It was like throwing a party where the guest of honor failed to show up.

The borough president's office and the state Department of Mental Hygiene co-sponsored a meeting last night to "create a climate of acceptance and support" for the development of group homes for the retarded residents of Willowbrook Developmental Center.

Ostensibly, the forum at the St. George campus of the College of Staten Island was aimed at the 140 members of Staten Island's three community boards, but only about 15 board members attended, a fact which piqued the sponsors of the educational event.

Deputy Borough President Ralph Lamberti called the showing "somewhat disappointing," and noted that if the community along with the state is to plan the development of group homes, the community boards would have to "educate the community."

The education to which Lamberti referred is the turn-around in philosophy about care and treatment for the retarded and developmentally disabled. "We're talking about a massive change in a system," explained Barbara Blum, a deputy commissioner for the Department of Mental Hygiene and the mother of a disabled child.

"We have a long way to go," she said, "and we're wasting lives and we're wasting money."

Essentially, where the state is trying to go is a reduction of the population at Willowbrook from its present 2,500 to 250 residents by 1981. To accomplish that, Mrs. Blum explained, the approximate 200 Staten Island residents living at Willowbrook will be placed into facilities in the Island community.

Mrs. Blum estimated that 12 to 15 group residences for those persons will have to be developed, with an additional 80 foster care or foster home placements. Each person placed in the community will also need at least six hours of day treatment services and many of those needed services have yet to be developed.

Presently, there is a group home in New Brighton which the state is in the last stages of developing for eight Willowbrook residents. Additionally, the Volunteers of America have been attempting for almost three years to find a suitable home to purchase.

Beatrice Victor, who is connected with the Volunteers project, expressed anger last night at what she sees as a discrimination by certain communities. "Why should we have to plead for a place for our adults to live? Why should we have to beg?" she asked.

Mrs. Victor said that in the Volunteers' three-year search numerous real estate brokers have refused to even try to sell a house in a middle-class residential neighborhood.

# Forum on group homes attracts few listeners

"They always say, 'I have a wonderful place on Jersey St.'" Mrs. Victor said referring to the New Brighton street that has deteriorated in recent years.

Mrs. Blum gave three reasons for the need for group homes for the retarded.

First, she said, is the legal pressure generated by the Willowbrook Consent Decree of April 1975 which mandated that the state develop community placements for Willowbrook residents in their community of origin.

Second, she pointed to the economic. Community care tends to be less expensive than institutional care. The state presently spends about \$25,000 per resident per year at Willowbrook.

Finally, in what some point to as the most important reason, it is in the community where the retarded person can best develop and grow to his potential. "For too long we have isolated those who are different than us," Mrs. Blum said.

While Mrs. Blum said that the "myths" about the retarded have to be broken down, it was Dr. Gerald Spielman who won the evening's applause with a "testament" about his personal experience with a group home for the retrained.

Dr. Spielman explained that he has recently purchased a Brooklyn house which is near a group home. "I can tell you that property values have not gone down because of that group home," he said. "I wish they had," he added with a smile, "but they haven't."

He explained that his children mingle freely and with no hang-ups with the retarded residents. He added that he's glad his children are not "growing up as ignorant as us."

What seemed to upset those at last night's meeting, however, was that the "ignorance" of community board members could have been overcome if more had attended the forum.