

'Foster grandparents' for Willowbrook kids

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Can you imagine a childhood spent without ever knowing your grandparents? Without ever tasting grandma's splendid cooking? Or without hearing grandpa's tales of his youth?

Can you imagine a childhood spent without ever knowing the warmth and

It's good news

knowledge that older persons can offer? Without seeing the creases of time gently cross a senior citizen's face?

Never having those experiences is a fact of life for almost 200 children who live at Willowbrook Developmental Center, but it is a fact that should be coming to an end when the state center initiates a foster grandparent program April 1.

The federal government has appropriated \$135,000 for the program and Willowbrook officials are expected to present the program's details tomorrow and Friday to councils that deal with the elderly and retardation.

"It's a beautiful idea that's just mutually beneficial to our residents as well as Staten Island senior citizens," says Linda Carelli, Willowbrook's director of consumer and citizen affairs. After announcing the program, part of Ms. Carelli's job will be to recruit over 80 volunteers who will receive a weekly stipend of \$32 for their efforts.

The purpose of the foster grandparent program is twofold — to provide meaningful part-time volunteer opportunities for low-income older persons and to provide supportive, person-to-person services for developmentally disabled children.

Mrs. Carelli said the program offers senior citizens "the chance to feel productive" as well as "enrich the lives of some Willowbrook residents who really have no one visiting them."

The program is mandated by the Willowbrook Consent Decree, agreed to by the state in 1975. It is a further attempt to provide a normalizing atmosphere for the retarded residents of Willowbrook.

To be eligible for the program, the senior citizens — male or female — must be 60 years of age or older, no longer in the regular work force, and must have an income that does not exceed \$3,615 a year, the federal poverty level.

The foster grandparents would work five days a week, for four hours each day, probably from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. They would divide their time between two children, accompanying the child to classes, to workshops, or just on a walk to the park.

According to Ms. Carelli, the benefits to the foster grandparents will be many. Before entering the program each will receive a complete medical examination, including X-rays, free of charge. The exam will be repeated each year for persons who stay in the program.

The foster grandparent will receive free transportation to and from Willowbrook each day, although Willowbrook has yet to find suitable transportation vehicle. He will also receive a hot lunch each day.

The foster grandparents will be given almost three weeks' vacation time, three weeks' sick time as well as a week in personal leave time, all with pay, which is \$1.60 an hour.

The program will cost \$135,000 in federal money, a figure which will be matched by the state Department of Mental Hygiene. The federal government allotted \$34 million for 185 foster grandparent programs nationwide last year. As of September, there were 13,934 foster grandparents in the country.

Anyone interested in joining the program should contact Robert Slawinski, director of volunteer services at Willowbrook, between 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.