

Small turnout hears plans to put retarded in community homes

By ROBERT MIRALDI

When a resident of Willowbrook Developmental Center was arrested last week and charged with rape and assault, some state officials wondered out loud if the incident would further slow the already torturous path toward finding homes in New York City for Willowbrook's residents.

State officials must be breathing a sigh of relief today after last night's meeting in an Annadale church to discuss that community placement effort. Only 12 persons were on hand for the public hearing sponsored by the community board which covers most of the South Shore — Board 2.

The subject of the arrest of James Rich, 19, a resident of Willowbrook, was mentioned only once, and that time in a rather disarming fashion. Observers offered a few explanations for the quiet, sparse gathering:

¶ Staten Island people were not particularly alarmed by the arrest of a retarded person, who allegedly left Willowbrook's grounds three weeks ago and committed the assault.

¶ Since no specific proposal has been made for a group home on the South Shore, residents of that area had no specific interest in the meeting.

¶ Only North Shore residents, who have long complained of a proliferation of health facilities in that area, are complaining about the movement to place the retarded in the community.

The reason for the low turnout is probably some combination of those three explanations, but it certainly made life easier for Barbara Blum, the regional commissioner of the state's division on mental retardation who had to face the group and answer questions, all of which were polite as could be last night.

The slim brown-haired commissioner has visited Staten Island often recently to spread the gospel of community placement. Last night she talked again of plans, preparations and precautions.

"With enough sharing of information," she said, "people are accepting."

What she is asking Staten Island to accept is the estimated 200 persons originally from Staten Island now residing at Willowbrook. She estimated that 12 group homes — "community residences we call them," she says — will eventually be needed for Staten Island. One is near opening and another is in the pipeline.

The overall plan is for most of the 2,500 persons now residing at Willowbrook to be placed into communities throughout New York City. She says the state's Metropolitan Placement Unit has opened 10 group homes, that five will open this month and that another 55 homes are in the works.

Promises, promises, a spokesman for Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly complained at the meeting in the Messiah Lutheran Church. Reading from a statement for Mrs. Connelly, Fran Jorin said: "There seem to be many reasons given as to why (community placement) is not already accomplished. I am not buying any of them."

Mrs. Jorin also cautioned that "not every individual now abiding at Willowbrook can be expected to be transformed into rational members of the community."

In response to a question about that statement, Mrs. Blum said she was not quite sure what "rational" meant, but she conceded that retarded persons will be given "varying degrees of independence."

She added that a "small population" at Willowbrook have behavioral problems and need psychiatric treatment for those problems. By far, they are the "smallest number" of residents who will be placed into community facilities, she said.

Speaking about the arrest of Rich, Sister Marie Bernadette a member of Community Board 2 who chaired the meeting, advised Staten Islanders to "be very careful not to generalize from one incident."

Mrs. Blum said that two group homes for each of Staten Island's three community boards are planned to house Willowbrook residents.