

Board 1 to advise on group homes

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA

A Community Board 1 committee acknowledged last night that the introduction of group homes for the mentally retarded into Staten Island communities is virtually a fait accompli, but it resolved to hold a "public advisory hearing" for those residents who will be neighbors of the group homes.

Both Barbara Blum, director of the Metropolitan Placement Unit, who addressed the Board 1 steering committee, and committee members acknowledged also the specter of community opposition that has haunted the project in the past and threatens three North Shore group homes scheduled to open this summer and in the fall.

By way of background, Mrs. Blum explained that the placement unit is bound by the Willowbrook Consent Order of 1975 to find homes for escalating quotas of Willowbrook Developmental Center residents.

Between now and Oct. 1, she said, her office must place 75 residents each month. By April 1, 1978, the placement unit will be finding homes for 100 residents each month. And by 1981, it is planned, the court-ordered reduction of

the Willowbrook population is supposed to be completed at 250.

The consent order did not stipulate, Mrs. Blum explained, any dispersion or distribution of group homes. "It was my judgment that there should be four or five in each planning (community) district," she explained. She added that only those Willowbrook residents who are Staten Island residents will be placed in group homes on the Island.

Fully staffed group homes will house an average of 10 persons. Approximately half of the residents of each home will not be former Willowbrook residents but will be drawn from the community, she said.

Board chairman Vincent Montalbano pointed out that board approval of the three North Shore sites—on Tysen St., New Brighton; the Castleton Park Apartments, St. George; and the Arlington Manor Apartments, Mariners Harbor—"is immaterial, considering the court order."

He characterized the group homes issue as a "special situation" and recommended that the board's job was to provide a meeting ground for state officials and the residents who will share their communities with the group home.

Mrs. Blum admitted that in the 15-month history of her office, she found only one community "that rose up and supported the group home idea." In this community, located in Queens, the group home "grew from a grassroots community project," she said.

Mrs. Blum blamed opposition to the placement of retarded persons in the community on "the lack of a massive education effort. We need to have many more facts about the benefits of community living for the retarded made known," she asserted.

She observed "In this society we tend to segregate those different than ourselves. We like beauty, success and good looks."

Retarded persons, she continued, "are among the most devalued persons in our society. They look different, act differently." Their separation from the mainstream "hasn't been good for them," Mrs. Blum declared.

She cited an oft-mentioned example, that of the plight of persons with simple physical handicaps who wind up in institutions for the mentally retarded and come, with time, to acquire the additional handicaps of the retarded.

Irritation and perhaps, anger, colored

her voice after successive mention of "community opposition and 'irrevocable opposition.'" "Retarded persons have a constitutional right to live among us," Mrs. Blum said. Later, she said, "I resent the fact that they (the community) consider our presence devaluing."

Board 1 members, along with Mrs. Blum, believe, presumably, that the "public advisory hearing," a compromise title arrived at last night after considerable discussion, will enlighten New Brighton, St. George and Mariners Harbor residents about group homes and retarded persons and encourage acceptance.

The Tysen St. group home, acquired by the state three years ago and opposed by the New Brighton community, may open in September. Two apartments which will serve as group homes in the Castleton Park Apartments are scheduled to open in July. These homes, sponsored by United Cerebral Palsy of New York, will serve wheelchair patients.

The Arlington Manor home, sponsored by the Volunteers of America, may open at the end of this month.

The hearing will be June 22 at 7:30 p.m. in Borough Hall, Room 220.