

Group homes for retarded: Pleas and protests

By TERENCE J. KIVLAN

Community residents clashed with state officials and parent-backed groups last night over a proposal to put a home for the severely retarded in the Arlington Terrace Apartments, Mariners Harbor.

"I've got a retarded child too," David Gavrity said at a Community Board 1 hearing in the Port Richmond Library. "But I'm raising mine myself, the same as a lot of people are raising theirs."

Gavrity, president of the Arlington Manor Civic Association, charged that the group home would become a profit vehicle for the Volunteers of America, the parent sponsored organization that would run the facility. "It's a money proposition, that's all," Gavrity declared.

Col. Belle Leach, social welfare secretary for the Volunteers, responded to the accusation. "We're here at the request of parents and agencies involved with the mentally retarded," she said. "We don't want a profit. We don't dare make a profit or else we'll lose our tax exempt status."

Other parents of retarded children supported the home proposal at the hearing. Mrs. Carol Mirabile of 41 Ellsworth Ave., Huguenot, said she saw the home as the sort of facility where her 12-year-old son should be eventually placed.

"For personal reasons I can't keep him in our home," Mrs. Mirabile explained. "I want a decent group home on Staten Island where I could visit him." Paul Merrill, whose 10-year-old

daughter is retarded, rose from his seat and started to explain how, in his view, the opposition group homes was caused by a lack of communication between officials and community residents about the problem of caring for the mentally retarded.

"I wish you could come into my home and see my daughter," he told Gavrity and other opponents of the Arlington Terrace facility. But then, overcome with emotion, Merrill sat down. "I can't speak," he whispered.

The hearing attracted about 30 persons and was sponsored by Community Board 1 to supply detailed information about the Mariners Harbor group home and a proposal to put a second such facility on the North Shore, this one in the Castleton Park Houses, New Brighton.

Barbara Blum, director of the Department of Mental Hygiene's Metropolitan Placement Unit, explained that the home are being created to comply with a federal court order mandating the transfer of most residents of Willowbrook Developmental Center to community facilities by 1981.

The opponents also charged that the sites for the two North Shore group homes were chosen "in secrecy." One woman said, "You don't have any community input. I don't understand why you don't have a grass roots sort of thing where you come into a community and say — help."

Mrs. Blum remarked, however, that when community groups are allowed to participate in site selection procedures, group homes "end up next to gas sta-

tions or adjacent to parking lots."

Also at last night's hearing were officials from United Cerebral Palsy of New York City, which would run the Castleton Park home.

The following other details about the two North Shore facilities and the court-ordered placement program were made available by Mrs. Blum, Col. Leach and the UCP representatives:

□ The Arlington Manor home will house 12 ambulatory residents, six from Willowbrook and six from the community, aged 18 to 50. The home would take up the entire second floor and would include rooms for permanent staff members.

□ The Castleton Park Houses home would house 20 non-ambulatory residents, 10 from Willowbrook and the rest from the community. The facility would consist of eight two-bedroom apartments, a dining area and an apartment for a residential manager.

□ The state has already set up some 30 group homes under the court order — all of them in other boroughs. Eventually each community board area in the city will have two or three community facilities for the mentally retarded.

□ The cost of maintaining residents in the homes will be as much as 50 per cent less than the \$30,000 the state spends each year to keep a resident at Willowbrook, which now houses 2,200.