

## Willowbrook residents voting for the first time

Like thousands of other Staten Islanders, perhaps as many as 78 formerly or currently institutionalized persons from Willowbrook Developmental Center will go to the polls Tuesday.

They will vote in the customary voting booths set up in PS 69, Merrymount Ave., New Springville — for the first time.

The Island office of the Board of Elections says They're just citizens and will be treated as such — given the allotted three minutes to push the levers, although it is possible (and normal board procedure) that some visually impaired individuals will need assistance within the booths.

The 78 developmentally disabled people — described by Willowbrook as high functioning despite their handicaps — have been registered through a wide-ranging adult education program that began last year.

The students are taught civics, and for the past month have been combing mounds of campaign literature provided by the headquarters of local and city candidates for public office.

James Walsh, director of program services for Willowbrook, is quick to point out that the instruction is strictly non-partisan. Participants, he says, are told of candidates stands on the issue "and like everyone else, make up their own minds."

"They generally choose candidates," Walsh said, "who they think will represent the interests of the handicapped." He notes, however, that the handicapped who have been registered, like average citizens, "seem to be apathetic to some degree."

During the first year of the program, according to Walsh, 48 Willowbrook people were registered, and those who chose to vote did so by absentee ballot at the institution.

But Walsh adds that this Tuesday, they'll get their first *real* taste of being

true Americans, casting ballots with other Staten Islanders in the mayoralty, the city council races and, if they choose, the various amendment issues.

Rosalie Hyland, chief clerk of the Staten Island office of the Board of Elections, responds to some critics who say that letting developmentally disabled people vote could lead to abuse, by acknowledging that there can always be abuses of the election process. But she adds: "The people I've dealt with at Willowbrook really seem quite non-partisan. We would hope that (no partisan abuses) of the sort would happen."

Mrs. Hyland also says that of the 78 persons registered to vote from Willowbrook, only a few have given party affiliation. Most are independents, entitling them to a vote only in general elections.

And for Willowbrook's part, Walsh explains that the adult education staff decides who they think is qualified to vote, adding that most of the persons selected are regarded only as "mildly" retarded — higher functioning people, he says, who can "make up their own minds."

— SYDNEY FREEDBERG