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Elin Howe, center, acting director of Willowbrook Developmental Center, leads members of a Port Richmond community group through Building 61 at the center along with Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, behind the director.

S.I. Advance Photo by Barry Schwartz

# Willowbrook tour leaves residents cold on training plan

By SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Jacqueline Publicover, the president of an Elm Park Parent-Teacher Association, yesterday went to the Willowbrook Developmental Center to see the type of workshop for the mentally retarded being proposed for her neighborhood.

She was against the plan before the "fact-finding" tour. And after the tour had ended, Mrs. Publicover had not changed her mind.

The mother of a 9-year-old girl who

attends PS 21, Hooker Pl., Mrs. Publicover recited a familiar litany of "concerns" about the state plan to turn the former Garber Brothers store on Richmond Ave., Port Richmond into a large training center for people who live or once lived at Willowbrook.

Those "concerns," Mrs. Publicover said, include a fear of increased crime, fear for the safety of "our children" and the safety of "the Willowbrook cases as well."

Willowbrook administrators, including

the facility's acting director Elin M. Howe, showed Mrs. Publicover and other Port Richmond residents the activities that center in Building 61, where the handicapped construct and package pens and other items, preparing to leave the institution to enter community life.

Led by Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, the only member of the entourage who seemed the least bit non-committal about the proposal, the skeptical parents and business leaders insisted they wanted the tour because they still had many questions about the site.



Assemblywoman Connelly, right, and members of the community group stand outside the former Garbers Department Store building on Richmond Ave. S.I. Advance Photo by Barry Schwartz

But questions on size, staffing, supervision, institutionalization and deinstitutionalization answered, the Port Richmond residents still objected, mainly on the basis that the area, once a thriving business section, already has been saturated with social service agencies.

Mrs. Connelly, chairman of the Assembly Mental Health Committee, said of the Building 61 programs, which state officials would like to move to Garbers: "These workshops are really excellent; I'm impressed by what I see. But I also understand the concerns of the community...It's a difficult problem we're faced with."

Miss Howe told the group that state officials, who are under court order to reduce Willowbrook's population, now an estimated 1,700, to 250 residents by 1981, are considering four or five alternatives to the Garber site within the Community Board 1 area.

"But I must be frank with you," she said. "We're operating under a rather constrictive time frame, and if we feel we can't find another adequate site, we would not hesitate to sign a lease for Garbers."

The acting director explained once again that the converted store would be used to provide training and counseling services primarily to the 280 former Willowbrook residents already living within the Board 1 area.

In addition, retarded persons unaffiliated with Willowbrook — Islanders

who have never had the advantages of such a workshop, would use the center from time to time, Miss Howe said.

"I'm still concerned," admitted Vivian Pepe, president of the Island PTAs, who attended yesterday's tour upon the request of PS 21 parents. "We offer no real opposition, though. I'm here because we really have to look into this (proposal) to see the impact it might have on this community and the schools."

"Looking around, here," another member of the fact-finding committee said, "you can see these people look happy and like they're really accomplishing something. I don't see why they have to be moved out (of Willowbrook)."

"Most of them, you will find, like to go out," Miss Howe responded, "like you and I. But the most important thing is it gives them that additional exposure that they can't really get in the institu-

tion. They're getting ready to live in the community. They need to be prepared for that goal."

In response, perhaps, to the oft-repeated allegations that retarded persons traveling to the workshop might come to some harm, Emma Coleman, a member of the tour, said she had a retarded child who was able to travel safely and efficiently throughout Staten Island.

But Mrs. Publicover and the others, saying they were sympathetic to the needs of retarded people, expressed doubt nevertheless that such a massive training center could operate so smoothly as Willowbrook officials insist it would.

"These are fragile people," Mrs. Publicover concluded. "They need special attention, and lots of supervision. I just don't think it can work out for the community."