

Plan to aid ex-patients of psychiatric hospitals adjust to community

By BRUCE ALPERT

The first Staten Island program designed specifically to help former patients at state psychiatric hospitals adjust to community living is being proposed by the North Richmond Community Mental Health Center.

The proposal calls for the development of a \$200,000 a year rehabilitation program to teach about 85 former hospital patients such basic skills as grooming, housekeeping and budgeting a weekly income, center officials say. In addition, extensive vocational training will be offered, they say.

"This will mark the first time that money has followed patients from state hospitals into the community if the grant is awarded," said Dr. Lawrence Miller, director of North Richmond.

Miller and state Department of Mental Hygiene officials agree that hundreds of former psychiatric patients have been placed on the Island and other communities across the state without adequate support services under the state's deinstitutionalization program.

"The goal of this program, which is funded 100 percent by the state, is to provide the means to integrate the former patients into the community," according to Marjorie H. Frank, a consultant for social rehabilitation programs for the Department of Mental Hygiene. "We don't want to see the former patients walking around aimlessly in the streets."

The program, designed for former psychiatric patients with at least five consecutive years in a state hospital, is already operating in the other four boroughs.

North Richmond officials are hoping to gain necessary city and state approval in time to start the program here sometime this summer.

Many of the patients that will benefit from the program now reside in adult homes on Staten Island. They receive psychiatric outpatient services from North Richmond, but are in need of

more direct assistance, according to Miller.

"These are the kind of people who don't take medication, don't show up for appointments, don't want to get out of bed, won't brush their teeth, won't shower," he said in a recent interview. "We have no resources to address these problems."

Under the program, North Richmond will provide a staff of nine professionals to work in groups and individually with the former psychiatric patients to help them through the trauma of living on their own after long periods in a state hospital, where they were completely dependent on others to meet their daily needs.

Although the program is earmarked only for former patients with a minimum of five consecutive years in a state hospital, North Richmond officials say nobody will be turned away.

"There's no way from a moral standpoint alone that we can turn anybody away simply because he doesn't meet the technical requirements," said Dr. Sheldon Blackman, director of research and evaluation for North Richmond.

The proposal is expected to be submitted shortly to the Staten Island Health Systems Agency Board and ultimately to various city and state agencies that must approve it before North Richmond can begin assembling a staff, according to Miller.

Mailed to Dr. Speer

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