

The right to live in the community

(Mrs. Camen is president of Willowbrook Chapter, Benevolent Society for Retarded Children.)

By GENEVIEVE A. CAMEN

There are hundreds of thousands of families of the retarded citizens in the state, plus a multitude of other children and adults who need supervised community residential care. Hostels offer the cheapest and the most effective way. To prove it — how about people power, to guarantee the right to live in the community to everyone who can.

We need voices for those who cannot speak; voices to protect the rights we have won for the retarded. Citizens of this country — we will not abuse the right to hostels by indiscriminate locations; we will not depreciate the value of our neighbor's house and property; we do not believe in mini-institutions in any community. We do believe that warehouses such as Willowbrook must be wiped off this earth now and forever and that the retarded citizens not be incarcerated in an environment, as an accommodation to some political leaders and community protesters who want no part of the unfortunates, who desire unfortunates out of sight and mind.

There exists much community controversy in accepting hostels, group homes, due to little understanding of the nature of retarded citizens, and less understanding of their impact on a community. Despite the fact that their fears are ill-founded, the position taken by

these communities and certain political leaders, many of whom have paraded their liberal credentials on other occasions, violate the fundamental moral, legal and civil rights of the retarded. The very thought that a small group of community residents can decide to prevent any human being, any citizen, from residing in their community is repugnant.

Our retarded children are not potential arsonists or vandals in schools, parks, business and residential areas, parking lots, nor use graffiti on buses and trains. Our retarded do not slam rocks and snowballs at windows and windshields of passing vehicles in residential developments. I emphasize some more — our retarded do not strip automobiles from their accessories, break open trunks and steal spare tires and parcels. I could go on and on.

Normal children in the community cost us hundreds of thousands of dollars in taxes because of senseless, willful destruction. We the parents of the rejected retarded contribute more than our share of these expenditures, so consequently change your attitude toward our retarded sick child in dire need of guaranteed quality care. I would like to comment that the incidents of anti-social and criminal behavior for the retarded people is considerably lower than the rate for those who are not retarded.

A federal court order, a landmark decision, is in effect. Hostels must be legally recognized and accepted in the

communities, as are schools, hospitals, nursing homes, churches, synagogues, health and cancer clinics.

Let us remind the objective community that these exceptional people with mental retardation did not bring about their mental handicap condition and neither did their parents and further one never knows when and where mental retardation will strike. The hostels and the services might become a necessity since this is an act of God and it can happen without warning.

We are now seeking help and solutions for our children because uppermost in our minds the heart-rending problem of what will become of my unfortunate child when I am gone is unanswered. We are much older now, our children mostly adults? Who will take care of them when we pass away?

We are asking for residential homes for our unfortunate children. We want to be able to guarantee that retarded people will be able to live in comfortable communities as accepted neighbors. By no means are we planning an invasion of violent, criminal, drug-using or sexually assaultive individuals in the neighborhoods. We are residents in the community; we cast our votes at governmental elections and contribute a generous share to the normal children's needs.

A permanent residence where the retarded can receive required treatment and care with a full spectrum of services for their lifetime and a home-like, comfortable, well-supervised setting where no one can put them out in the streets and they can be protected from harm.