

Group home opens at center

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Back 20 years ago, when New York State was still packing retarded persons into Willowbrook State School like sardines in a can, there was an agency out in the Staten Island community doing things differently.

Staten Island Aid for Retarded Children was treating its clients like any other humane educator would, helping them become all that they are capable of. But the agency was doing its work in the community, not in the institution.

Yesterday Staten Island Aid took what might seem a strange step — back to the institution — opening a group home for seven persons on the grounds of the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook.

The move is not contradictory, however, because the role of the group home fits well into Staten Island Aid's aims.

"We want to train people here in daily living skills that will enable them to move to other homes out in the community," Joan Hodum, SIARC's director, said yesterday amidst the bustle of the facility's open house ceremony.

According to Mrs. Hodum, most of the home's seven residents will attend Staten Island Aid day treatment programs and some will eventually live in the two other group living facilities the agency hopes to develop on Staten Island.

The nine-room wood-frame house is located on a back portion of the 382-acre developmental center grounds on a street called Executive Way because the cottages there used to house Willowbrook's administrative staff and its doctors.

At the end of Executive Way, near Forest Hill Rd., is a larger house where



Administrators of Staten Island Aid for Retarded Children, Pat Kelly, left, Joan Hodum, Luke Powers and Carole Mirabile, chat during an open house in the agency's newest group home for the retarded in the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook.

S.I. Advance Photo by Frank J. Johns

the Willowbrook director formerly resided and that, too, is being converted into a group living facility where retarded persons learn to make the transition from Willowbrook to the community.

For Mrs. Hodum, the opening yesterday brought nothing but compliments. "This is by far the nicest home I've seen," one visitor told her, standing in a brightly carpeted foyer.

"If I could live here, and I could, then it's nice enough for our clients," Mrs. Hodum replied.

"This looks like a home," another visitor told her.

"Most look like a small institution,"

one person said, "but this looks like a home."

While guests milled around the house a large brown and red dog romped through the house, licking the hands of the visitors. "He's part of this house," said David Engells, one of two managers of the house.

Engells said the targeted length of stay for each person living in the house is a year, after which he would move to a permanent home in the community. Six of the home's residents (there are only four now) will come from the center and one will be from the Staten Island community.