

Parents, educators, officials probe needs, rights of Island handicapped

Parents, administrators, educators and advocates for the disabled and retarded gathered yesterday at Wagner College for a forum that marked the beginning of "Rights of the Handicapped Week."

Sponsored by the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council, the symposium featured workshops on education, recreation, employment, community residences and the medical-clinical needs of the handicapped.

The workshops were geared mostly to parents of disabled persons. The council, which helps in planning for the needs of the handicapped on Staten Island, intends to take the minutes from each workshop as a guide to its future planning.

The rights and needs of the handicapped and retarded have been an issue of particular concern to Staten Islanders because of the notoriety of Staten Island Developmental Center, formerly Willowbrook State School.

National focus has been placed on the state center because of its past poor treatment to the 5,000 persons who once resided there. A 1975 agreement reached in a federal court has spurred radical changes at the center, most focusing on what the courts have defined as rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution.

Two of the key guidelines established in court have been the right of the retarded to live in the least restrictive setting possible, and the right to an individual plan of education or rehabilitation.

Those two principles have led to demands by parents and others for dramatic improvements in education, employment, recreation, medical care and housing. As institutions, and Willowbrook in particular, have been forced to reduce their populations, new kinds of housing possibilities have been created — like hostels and halfway houses.

There are currently three such group living facilities for the disabled on Staten Island.

For the most part, group living facilities being established now are taking in a mixture of clients — some from institutions and some directly from the community where they are living. That mix, according to the Beatrice Victor, director of a Mariners Harbor group home, has "worked beautifully."

Part of the discussion at the forum on community residences dealt with sexual rights of the retarded, a question, Mrs. Victor pointed out, that has been repeatedly raised by community groups who have been fearful of the retarded.

Sandra Noll, a registered nurse, discussed the need for sexual education among the retarded who, she said, go through the same sexual and social developmental stages as other persons. "The retarded," she said, "need a clear understanding about what society expects of them."

The retarded, she pointed out, can understand right from wrong, but they

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