

Our opinion

The state as neighbor

Recent months have seen residents of several Staten Island communities rise in opposition to plans, developed by state agencies or by organizations funded by the state, to operate neighborhood-based facilities for the mentally retarded or for those dependent on drugs or alcohol.

The need for such facilities is clear, and we do not believe reasonable residents of the Island community have ever intended that their opposition be directed against those less fortunate individuals who would patronize neighborhood counseling centers.

Opposition, rather, has been based in large part on very real and justifiable fears that the state-run or supported facilities would not make good neighbors. For that, the state has no one to blame but itself.

Although small, community-based facilities for the retarded and for those dependent upon narcotic substances have appeared only within the last few years, government agencies have done a rather remarkable job of generating community opposition to such programs in

that short time. They have done that by developing plans for the facilities in near-secrecy, by siting them without regard for the possibility that some communities might be overloaded with public offices, and by operating the facilities as if they existed within a vacuum.

For its part, the state has invited opposition to its new proposals by the manner in which its agencies have run institutions now in existence on the Island.

Isolated disturbances at or escapes from facilities such as the Staten Island Developmental Center, the Arthur Kill Correctional Facility and the South Beach Psychiatric Center are unavoidable, and such incidents might be tolerated by community residents — if they really occurred on an isolated basis.

But the psychiatric center, in particular, has been plagued by escapes, two of which occurred within the last week.

On Monday, a woman escaped

from the Ocean Breeze center and ran to a home in nearby Seaview, pounding on the front door in an effort to gain entrance; after the home owner contacted the center, the woman was picked up by security guards and returned to the center. Early Tuesday, a man who escaped from the center on Saturday was captured when he wandered into the Advance Building in Grasmere.

Center officials say such escapes occur because manpower shortages make it impossible to staff the facility's gatehouses on an around-the-clock basis. Instead of complaining about an inadequate security force officials ought to do something about it, so neither they nor community residents need worry about psychiatric patients simply walking away from the center.

Before the state attempts to make itself a neighbor in any more Island communities, it must make sure it's a good neighbor in Ocean Breeze and other areas where it already maintains a presence. If the state does that, it might find itself a more welcomed neighbor in the future.