

Group homes studied to determine if they devalue neighbors' property

By MARY BETH PFEIFFER

The communities around 62 group homes for the mentally retarded are being surveyed statewide to determine if the facilities lower neighboring property values.

The survey, commissioned by the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, with a \$15,000 federal grant, is being conducted by a Princeton University professor, Julian Wolpert, and three graduate students. Since May, they have been combing real estate directories and files in local County Clerks' offices to chart the relationship, if any, between the establishment of group homes and the sale of other homes in a several-block radius.

According to Cora Hoffman, spokeswoman for the state office, the state contracted for the survey in part because of the torching in January of a home in Huntington, L.I., that had been purchased for use as a group home for the mentally retarded. The community had hotly contested the siting, which was within a quarter-mile of a similar facility, she said.

In a telephone interview, Wolpert, an expert in urban planning and public affairs, said researchers will study if housing turnover has been affected by the group home, as well as if the prices of homes sold nearby have been influenced. Property transactions in similar neighborhoods without group homes will also be studied, he added.

Although Staten Island now has five group homes for the retarded, they are not included among the 62 to be studied since none are in single-family homes in the community — two being on the grounds of Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, and three in highrise apartment buildings.

The study is considered significant for the borough, however, since more group homes are expected to be established here as the institution continues to release residents into the community. Additionally, there are approximately 35 group homes for socially maladjusted youths here and a frequent argument against them has been their effect on neighboring property values.

Included in the study are the communities around 14 homes in Brooklyn, six in the Bronx, four on Long Island and 38 upstate.

Wolpert, who conducted a similar study in White Plains, N.Y., said he expects the results to be the same. "I would frankly expect that if a home is located with care and maintained well, there is really no effect on property," he said.

Often, he said, the public confuses the mentally retarded with the mentally ill and fears unpredictable behavior. "As soon as neighbors see the residents (of the group home) and compare them to the other people on the street — like the guy who drives the noisy motorcycle or the man who beats his wife — they find they are relatively good neighbors," he said.

Jennifer Howse, the former executive director of the Willowbrook Review Panel, the court-appointed body moni-

toring the Willowbrook institution, said the study will at last answer definitively one of the most frequently voiced objections to the placement of the retarded in the community.

Ms. Howse, now an associate commissioner with the state retardation office, said past studies have shown that property values "are subject to a number of forces a lot stronger than whether a group home is around," but none have been performed in New York City.

"What we're trying to do is New York City specifically," she said. "People really want to be able to say what the effect will be here." Since the 1975 Willowbrook Consent Decree, which ordered a stop to the long-term institutionalization of the mentally retarded, 48 group homes have been established in the city, whereas before there were 11.

Wolpert said the study will be completed by Sept. 1 and the results would be made public in a report.