

Bellamy urges boards to accept group homes

By BRUCE ALPERT

City Council President Carol Bellamy urged community board leaders yesterday to accept homes for the mentally retarded in their neighborhoods to avoid "the horrible alternative of Willowbrook."

Speaking at a City Hall workshop for community board chairmen and district managers, Miss Bellamy said studies have demonstrated that the handicapped learn more in small, home-like settings than they do in large institutions, such as the Staten Island Developmental Center, formerly Willowbrook State School.

"What we have to do now is accept the responsibility, which better treatment demands," Miss Bellamy said in a prepared statement. "We can no longer lock the mentally retarded away with the vague wish that they will get better."

Some community boards, including Board 3 on Staten Island, have responded by helping to develop group homes in their communities, Miss Bellamy said. She presented Board 3 District Manager James Sak and representatives of six other community boards with certificates last night awarded by One to One, a private organization representing the rights of the retarded.

"I certainly think that the members of Community Board 3 should be proud of the job they've done," Sak said before accepting the award in Board of Estimate chambers at City Hall. "My own gut feeling is that Board 3 is the first board to look at our entire area in planning for group homes, rather than just taking it on a one-by-one basis."

The board, working with officials from the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, last month approved 13 sites on the South Shore as potential group homes.

"The action of the board will probably pave the way for other community boards, all of whom will be mandated to

plan for group homes in their communities," Sak said.

In her address to community board representatives, Miss Bellamy said she will join a public education program sponsored by One to One to ease apprehension about group homes.

On Staten Island, some residents have objected to proposed group home sites, saying they fear for the safety of their children and a decrease in property values.

But Miss Bellamy said community board leaders have a responsibility to

counter such arguments by pointing out there is no evidence that the mentally retarded are more violent than other people. A recent Princeton University survey, she said, shows that group homes do not affect property values.

Most importantly, Miss Bellamy said, group homes are "a source of family unity."

"In the past, for all but the very rich, the only alternative for the parents of a

retarded child has been a state institution," Miss Bellamy said. "Such places are not only often cruel, but they break up homes."

Under a consent decree signed by Gov. Carey in 1975, the state must reduce the population of the Island center, which once housed more than 5,000 people, to 250 by 1981. Most residents are to be placed in community facilities that house eight to 14 persons. The decree

states that residents should be returned to their hometowns. About 2,150 people currently reside at the island center.

Now sixty-eight community facilities for the retarded now operate in New York City, with 27 scheduled to open and 47 in the planning process, state officials say.

A 1978 state law gives the city's 59 planning boards power to review, but not to veto, potential group home sites.