

State knew of conditions at boarding house

By ROBERT MIRALDI

Staten Island mental health officials were prepared to provide badly needed services to discharged psychiatric patients living in a Princes Bay boarding house, but regional mental health officials decided against it late in the fall.

Thus, the residents of the former Christmas Tree Inn have continued to live in conditions that Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly has charged are "life threatening." A top official of an Island psychiatric center concedes that the people in the Inn are on the

edge of existence."

Most of the approximately 20 persons who live in the 51 Wilbur St. boarding house are former patients of the South Beach Psychiatric Center or the North Richmond Community Mental Health center. Officials at both centers say they have been somewhat aware of the conditions at the boarding house.

Mrs. Connelly last week asked state and city agencies to probe the boarding house's workings, charging that inadequate heat and hot water, and generally filthy living conditions threaten residents' lives. An Advance investigation

found numerous violations of the city's health and building codes.

The acting director of South Beach said in an interview that the center had made plans this summer to staff the boarding house and essentially arrange for all the services the mentally disabled residents require. The program would have been similar to ones that have been established in 10 Manhattan single room occupancy (SRO) hotels.

In November, however, South Beach officials were told that instead of the SRO program regional officials had decided to set up a referral-placement unit

at St. Vincent's Medical Center's psychiatric emergency room.

Assemblywoman Connelly has already clashed with regional officials over that referral unit, but now, after revelations of the conditions in the Princes Bay boarding house, she said she will attempt to block the unit.

"I don't know whether we can," she said, but "I've asked the (Assembly) Ways and Means Committee to check and see if the money can be halted." The referral unit is expected to cost

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about \$100,000. Mrs. Connelly said she questions the value of a referral unit if all it would do is to place persons "in a place like the Christmas Tree Inn."

The referral unit would be one of five in New York City. They are part of the state Office of Mental Health's overall plan to deal with the thousands of chronic psychiatric patients who have been released from state hospitals and who are now going largely without any medical or mental health services.

The referral units and the programs established in SROs are funded by a special legislative grant of \$4,494,548. The money was supposed to give priority to establishing services in the SROs and other similar housing.

Mrs. Connelly contends that when the Legislature appropriated the so-called Community Support System money it was to provide first for the discharged patients. Mrs. Connelly is chairwoman of the Assembly Mental Health Committee.

Patricia Oulten, acting director of South Beach, a state facility, said it was her opinion that the referral unit could still be halted and that a program could be established in the boarding house.

She said that the CSS money has allowed South Beach to set up a similar program in the Times Plaza Hotel in downtown Brooklyn. She said the program has been "very successful" and

that the landlord has bowed to state pressure to clean up that hotel. She felt the same could be done at the Christmas Tree Inn.

As for the Christmas Tree Inn today, Mrs. Oulten agreed that it "offers its residents close to nothing" in services. "We recognize the deficiencies," she said, but added: "Those people would be sleeping in the ferry terminal without it."

A spokesman for North Richmond confirmed that two or three of its former patients have been referred to the Christmas Tree Inn "but only when all other options have been exhausted."

The spokesman, Eric Feldmann, said hospital officials "deplore the situation," but he asked, "What would you do in our situation?" Feldmann said the Inn was a better lodging than, say, the St. George ferry terminal where many of the Inn's residents formerly slept.

During the summer, when South Beach was planning its services at the boarding house, another state agency, the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, was considering it as a group home for retarded residents of Staten Island Developmental Center.

John Tulu, an aide to the developmental center's director, visited the site this summer. "We were appalled," he said, citing conditions of "general filth."

Tulu said center officials contacted South Beach officials to alert them to

conditions. "One official told us the place was not so bad," Tulu recalled.

Tulu found the conditions particularly irritating because as the state, under court pressure, attempts to find small group homes for retarded persons it has to meet extremely strict building, safety and sanitation codes.

But here, Tulu thought, is another agency of the state discharging people into a facility that mental retardation officials wouldn't even consider.

Tulu said he revisited the building with representatives of the Facilities Development Corp., architects for the state, and the inspectors immediately rejected the building, saying it would be much too costly to renovate for the retarded.

One source said that South Beach officials made it quite clear to the developmental center officials that the Christmas Tree Inn "was their place." More than one developmental center worker, the source said, told him they "didn't want to step on South Beach's toes."

Mrs. Oulten said she was contacted this summer by Elin Howe, the retardation center's director. "I told her we were hoping to set up a program there and that we considered it a priority."

But then, in November, without consultation and with no prior warning, regional officials told South Beach that the boarding house program was out and that a referral unit would be set up instead.

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