

Commentary: The retarded don't live in boarding houses

Community-based care for retarded monitored by many

By THOMAS A. COUGHLIN 3rd

A newspaper has a right, even a responsibility, to act as watchguard over the actions of a public agency. Editorials criticizing agency actions which are negligent or incompetent hopefully lead to public and political reaction to correct what needs correction.

But, a newspaper also has the responsibility to see to it that its commentary is above reproach. Such was not the case in regard to the editorial which appeared in the Jan. 7 Sunday Advance under the headline, "A new New York disgrace."

The editorial appeared on the same day that an expose was run that concerned conditions under which a group of former South Beach Psychiatric Center patients were alleged to be living in a boarding house on the South Shore. We don't know what caused the situation that led to that story. We are familiar with the aims of the state Office of Mental Health but certainly cannot speak for them. We do know that the story dealt with an alleged problem involving psychiatric patients, not mental-

ly retarded persons.

Let's get the facts straight. No mentally retarded people were placed in or are living in the boarding house in question. No agency, public or private, representing the mentally retarded was involved in any manner with that story. We have our own story to tell and we are proud of it.

Yet, the editorial supposedly reacting to the story concerning the boarding house, improperly lays the problem at the feet of the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities and unfairly misrepresents four years of excellent progress made by thousands of hard-working employees.

It is true, as the Advance pointed out, that a decade ago the disgrace that was Willowbrook was revealed. It is true that the state made a promise to change and — just four years ago — that promise was backed by commitment when the governor signed the document known as the Willowbrook Consent Decree.

It is not true that efforts to meet that commitment have created a new disgrace. That will not happen, indeed

given the sensitivity of the devices established to monitor the progress of compliance with consent decree directives, that cannot happen.

To answer the question posed by the misconception that the residents of that boarding house were mentally retarded, let me clearly say this. The Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, its developmental centers, and the many parent groups and voluntary agencies with whom we cooperate to build better lives for the retarded, are setting the standard for the nation in establishing community residential and day services programs for our mentally retarded clients.

We plan for each individual's movement from an institution to a home and life in the community. That effort begins with individual assessment and preparation for community life. It includes complete involvement of the parents or other legal guardians in a cooperative effort to find the most appropriate home and way of life for the individual in question. The rights of the individual and his or her parents are protected by a due process procedure

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