

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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which can eventually go to a formal hearing to assure that all questions have been answered.

While the individual candidate for community living is being thus prepared at the developmental center, another effort is simultaneously taking place to locate or establish the best possible residence for him or her.

That procedure involves both state employees and a number of sponsoring agencies such as the Association for Retarded Children, United Cerebral Palsy, Catholic Charities and more.

We are also bound in that effort by monitoring devices and groups and, most recently, are required by law to gain the formal cooperation of the involved municipality — community planning board — in selecting a potential residence. Any potential deficiency in residence comes to the attention of any number of people, groups or agencies and is made public at both meetings and formal hearings.

At any rate, the main source of community residential programs for the mentally retarded are community residences, homes operated by respectable

agencies or the state itself. We use no boarding houses, no single room occupancy hotels and no proprietary homes for adults although a handful of retarded people remain in the latter who were sent there under a previous administration.

Other mentally retarded former residents of state developmental centers live with people in their homes under a foster or family care program and a few are capable of what we call supervised living or partial independence.

Under the terms of the consent decree, no resident may go to a home without all of these steps having been taken to protect his future well being. That is also this agency's policy in places where the decree's terms are not binding.

Further, every client placed in the community must have a full six-hour program of daily services suited to his or her particular needs. All of these conditions are to be overseen by a caseworker whose job it is to assure that they are there, and are adapted to the changing needs of each individual.

We in turn are watched over by the

Willowbrook Review Panel, a court-appointed body which monitors all aspects of the decree's implementation, as well as Consumer Advisory Boards composed of parents and relatives of residents of all our facilities.

I can proudly say that our programs not only aspire to meet the "ideal of deinstitutionalization," but have assured that the mentally retarded people we are guiding to a better life in the community will find a life that is indeed better, and will be for the rest of their lives.

We can understand that every effort we make will not bring cheers; our audience has other interests. But criticism of what is being done should be just. For to be otherwise the injustice falls upon the mentally retarded themselves.

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(Thomas A. Coughlin 3rd is commissioner of the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.)

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