

State retardation office sets its sights on Emerson Hill house for special center

By ROBERT MIRALDI

John is 14 years old and retarded. He lives at home with his parents and has all his life.

John attends the Occupational Training Center in Concord. He has mental and physical disabilities that make it especially difficult for his parents to care for him at home.

"We love John very much and have no regrets about never putting him in an institution," John's mother says. "But there are times when we need a break. We just want to get away, without him and not worry that he's being taken care of."

"But we don't really know what to do with him," his mother explains.

If plans by the Staten Island Developmental Center are realized, there will be a house on Emerson Hill where

parents with children like John will be able to place their child for up to a month at a time. The state describes the service as respite care.

"Parents tell us all the time, 'I need that service. I need a few days off.' It's a psychological thing," says Cora Hoffman, spokesman for the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.

The concept of respite care, or relief for parents who have retarded or disabled children living with them at home, is not a new one. But it is one state officials believe will have increasing importance as money and treatment shift from institutions to communities.

"It's part of the range of services we have to offer," Dr. Jennifer Howse of the state's regional retardation office says. "It's badly needed, and right now there is a big gap in the service sys-

tem."

The state is trying to reduce the size of the Staten Island Developmental Center from 2,000 residents to 250 by 1981. To do that it must develop small group homes, day programs, transportation, education and other services in the community.

It also must provide a support system for parents who have kept their children at home, especially for parents whose children are severely disabled, says Barbara Hawes, director of program services for the state. "It's a critical area" if those children are to be kept out of institutions in the future, she says.

Respite care could be planned — for a parent's vacation, weekend trip, hospital stay or overnight visit — or emergency, such as if a parent takes ill suddenly or if the child has a behavioral

problem that can best be stabilized away from home.

In August a letter was sent to Community Board 2, proposing a respite-care home, with three or four beds, at 8 Diana Trail, a dead-end street on Emerson Hill. The small, shuttered house already is owned by the state and is the former residence of the director of the state's Institute for Basic Research, Willowbrook.

When Dr. Henry M. Wisniewski became director of IBR in July 1976, he

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