

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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STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE, Friday, January 19, 1979

Purpose of home: Give parents a respite

Retarded center eyed for Emerson Hill

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told the state he would live elsewhere and that the Diana Trail residence might be a good group home. State officials thought it was too small for a group home, which usually accommodates eight persons. Respite care seemed a natural.

Elin M. Howe, director of the Staten Island Developmental Center, who calls respite care a "most desperately needed" service, says the structure would house no more than five clients and would have three or four specially trained caretakers. She called the location "extremely desirable."

In her Aug. 23 letter to the community

board, Miss Howe said she would "appreciate board approval." The proposal never got out of the board's mental health subcommittee because, the subcommittee's former chairman Linda Carelli says, she was told the state was not interested.

Miss Howe says the state is interested. The proposal has been put on the subcommittee's Jan. 30 agenda. Some board members say the home would be too costly to renovate and would not have good road access.

John Tillou, an aide to Miss Howe, says the access problem concerned the state, but he added officials now believe the small road is in good shape and

emergency vehicles could get to it. A reporter drove easily to it Wednesday after a 2-inch snowfall.

Tillou says renovation costs, needed to meet safety codes, would not be any more than with other homes for the retarded, plus, he says, there would be no purchase price. "It will meet our needs," he says.

Some officials say that funding for participating clients could be a problem. Technically, parents who have kept their children out of institutions receive no money for their children's care, unlike the \$30,000 spent yearly for an individual at the developmental center in Willowbrook.

The money, state officials say, could come either from the center's regular budget or a special appropriation state officials have asked the governor to make in his budget to be announced Jan. 31. The budget line calls for money for 40 respite beds in the state. State officials declined to specify the amount of the budget request.

Whatever Community Board 2 should vote, however, it might not matter. Miss Howe says that under current legislation the state is not required to get community approval for so few beds. The house is not considered a group home. "I hope they approve," she says, "but it doesn't need board approval."

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