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Residences for Retarded Earn Wider Acceptance

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VALLEY STREAM, L.I. — Gary Shaw did everything he could to prevent the opening of a community residence for the retarded next door to his parents' home here.

He spearheaded petition drives, wrote newspaper advertisements exhorting the community to mobilize against the supposed threat, and even tape-measured the building that was to be used for the residence to see if it might be in technical violation of local zoning ordinances.

Catholic Charities opened the Christopher residence anyway, promising only a year later to poll the neighborhood to see if the opposition was still as vehement. It wasn't. Mr. Shaw, for example, is now giving speeches in other communities urging acceptance of the residences.

Opposition in Watertown

Similarly, most of the 10 hostels in and around Watertown, N.Y., drew public opposition when they were proposed. Perhaps the stiffest came last May when the local chapter of the Association for Retarded Children announced plans to open a hostel in the town's residential district. Mayor Karl R. Burns said at the time that "if there's any way of stopping" the association's director, "I'll stop him."

But there was no legal way, the hostel opened, and Mayor Burns says he has not received a single complaint since the new hostel began operation two months ago.

State mental-retardation officials and leaders of voluntary organizations say that the neighborhood acceptance gained

by the Christopher residence or the hostels in and around Watertown in Jefferson County is typical of the reaction to almost all the 280 such residences now open in the state, 78 of them in New York City. They cite, for instance, the case of Queens Planning Board 11, which three years ago had vehemently opposed opening a home on Gaskell Road in Little Neck. The board recently voted unanimously to support the opening of a second home in the Bayside section.

And they hope a new state law requiring advance warning to communities before a residence can be opened will ease some fears and avoid new confrontations.

"The community residence program for the retarded is forcing middle-class and affluent communities for the first time to accept different people that they can't exclude through zoning," said Paul R. Dolan, of One-to-One, a nonprofit organization begun by a coalition — including the American Broadcasting Companies — that has financed 50 community residences. "The community residences become a focal point for a lot of vague fears about urban sprawl, property values, sexual assaults and crime. But the barrier is temporary."

Dr. Jennifer L. Howse, associate commissioner of mental retardation for New York City and Long Island, said, "I don't know of any case where things didn't stabilize and become positive once the homes were open."

The push for deinstitutionalization received its greatest impetus from a case involving Staten Island's Willowbrook State School. Parents of residents living at what is now known as the Staten Island Developmental Center filed a class action suit in Federal court in 1972 charging that rights of patients there were being violated by neglect, a lack of rehabilitation