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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

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programs and unsanitary living conditions.

By 1975, when the state signed a consent agreement in the case, a new philosophy had taken hold aimed at reversing the century-old method of treating the retarded in institutions set apart from the community. This thinking was encouraged by new Federal regulations upgrading standards for institutionalized patients.

Almost simultaneously with the signing of the Willowbrook agreement, the state elected to meet the new Federal standards by placing 8,500 of the 19,500 retarded persons then living in 20 state institutions in homelike settings in local communities. Because of protests over "dumping" of former institutionalized mental patients into communities such as Long Beach, L.I., where they could be seen wandering around, purposeless and unsupervised, the program for the retarded called for scattering the residences all over the state so that no area would become saturated.

The latest court order in the Willowbrook case, negotiated last September, called for the state to place 50 residents a month in small community residences. However, according to Dr. Howse, "we have been making half that number." Cora Hoffman, special assistant to the Commissioner of Mental Retardation, said the state was about 15 percent behind in its timetable for emptying the other state institutions.

Opposition Upsets Timetable

Nonetheless, opposition preceding the opening of many of the residences has been a major cause of the state's inability to meet the court-ordered timetable for emptying Willowbrook, and federally mandated schedules for cutting by nearly one-half the population of the other 20 institutions for the learning disabled.

The state is also fighting a suit seeking to close the Suffolk Developmental Center in Melville, L.I., whose population was to have been cut to 1,375 by next March 31, but which still houses 1,630 persons. Murray Schneps, the attorney who filed that suit on behalf of the parents of residents there, said "there is no aggressive community placement plan at all."

The most successful effort to move the retarded into the community has been upstate, in Jefferson County, where the local chapter of the Association for Retarded Children has removed 334 persons from state institutions. Two months ago the association made Jefferson County the first in the state to have taken all its retarded residents out of institutions.

Of the 445 people in the program, about 250 live at home; another 75 live with

other families; six have their own apartments, and more than 100 reside in hostels run by the association.

More than 300 of the retarded work at paying jobs, some as custodians at public and commercial buildings, some at the association's farm, and most at Production Unlimited, an association-run industry. The two sheltered workshops produce the examination blue books used by 72 universities in the Northeast, every three-ringed binder used by the state bureaucracy, and about five million plastic information tags sold each year to the United States Army.

The community opposition took an especially virulent form in January 1978, a planned residence in Greenlawn, L.I., was burned to the ground by arsonists, according to the police. That incident prompted a freeze of the state's community residence efforts on Long Island, and a campaign by state retardation officials to meet with every local government body on the Island to enlist their cooperation.

Alternative Was Rejected

In September, a new state law designed to prevent further confrontations took effect, according to its primary sponsor, Senator Frank Padavan, the Queens Republican. It requires that local communities be notified in advance of planned residences and given an opportunity to suggest alternative sites. If no consensus is reached, the law calls for a hearing by the Commissioner of Mental Retardation, Thomas Caughlin 3d, whose ruling can still be reviewed by the courts.

Among the cases already taken to the Commissioner are one involving Community Planning Board 3 in Jackson Heights, Queens, and another in Commack, L.I. In the Commack case, the Smithtown Town Board offered as an alternative empty professional residences on the grounds of Kings Park Psychiatric State Hospital. The state and the voluntary group that would run the residence rejected that alternative as totally inappropriate.

No ruling on the Commack site has been made yet by the Commissioner, but an order has been issued to move ahead on the proposed residence in Jackson Heights. In that instance, Community Planning Board 3 suggested alternatives including a building sandwiched between a discotheque and a topless bar.

"The opposition comes from a fear of the unknown," said Mr. Shaw, the former leader of the Valley Stream opposition. "We didn't really know the difference between the retarded and emotionally disturbed people. We thought they were going to molest our children, wander the streets and destroy our property values."



James Ehmann

In Jefferson County, N.Y., Julius Rosen, above, at 80 is in a hostel after 75 years of institutional care. Right, a child hugs teacher before going home from special school.

