

# State hopes 250G program improves group home image

By BRUCE ALPERT

Tuesday morning, Arnold Zenker will rise to his feet and tell state officials gathered at the Institute for Basic Research in Willowbrook that he doesn't want a group home in his community.

No, he's not another community resident speaking at a public hearing on group homes for the retarded.

He's a communications consultant hired by the state as part of \$250,000 program to improve the image of deinstitutionalization, the state's current

policy of closing down large institutions in favor of small community facilities.

Cora Hoffman, spokesman for Mental Retardation Commissioner Thomas A. Coughlin, says the state last year committed the funds after finding it was doing an inadequate job of explaining deinstitutionalization to the community.

The state awarded a contract to the Washington, D.C., firm of Porter Novelli and Associates, which prepared a slide presentation, television advertisements and other materials portraying group homes. The materials were de-

signed to dispel "myths" that retarded people are prone to violence and that property values go down when a group home opens in a neighborhood, Ms. Hoffman says.

But the most important part of the program, Ms. Hoffman says, are the workshops designed to prepare state workers to better explain deinstitutionalization to the community.

That's where Zenker, a former CBS news executive who filled in for Walter Cronkite during a strike of TV newsmen several years ago, comes in. Zenker, whose Boston firm was subcontracted by Porter & Novelli Associates to run the workshops, has read all the arguments of group home opponents.

He shouts tough questions about group homes to state officials, videotapes their responses, and then offers a critique.

Elin Howe, director of the Staten Island Developmental Center, who has the task of explaining group home proposals in the borough to sometimes hostile audiences, says Zenker's critiques helped her considerably.

Ms. Howe said she has learned to use

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