

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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"less bureaucratized" in her presentations and to answer questions without being defensive.

"Instead of being defensive, we'll say 'sure we've had problems, but here's what we want to do about them,'" said Ms. Howe, who took part in a Zenker-led workshop in Syracuse. Zenker will lead another workshop Tuesday at the Institute for Basic Research.

In addition, Ms. Howe says she will now try to avoid giving long-winded presentations, full of facts and figures that "people really aren't interested in." Rather, she says she will try to get to the point faster and to questions foremost on the minds of her audience.

Ms. Hoffman said state officials, partially as a result of consultants' suggestions, will begin to aggressively try to

sell merits of community residences, where mental retardation experts believe residents can better reach their potential.

"We've always waited until we had a proposal for a group home and then come in and tried to explain the concepts," Ms. Hoffman said. "It's the worst time to do it because everyone is so emotional with their concerns about the impact on their homes and neighborhood."

Ms. Hoffman said letters are going out to more than 100 community, civic, and fraternal organizations requesting a date when a community placement official can explain deinstitutionalization.

Robert T. Druckenmiller, vice president of Porter & Novelli Associates, says he and Zenker usually work with corporate accounts, including oil companies, banks and large manufacturers.

But he maintains both that corporate executives and state officials have a common problem: "They both need to improve their ability to communicate and explain their programs so they are not misunderstood."

Ms. Hoffman insists the \$250,000 price tag is justified because Porter & Novelli and Zenker will work hundreds of hours and prepare slides and materials to help state officials in their public presentations. In addition, she said, the contract also includes communications help for the state Office of Mental Health in its efforts to explain the needs of psychiatric patients.

"We needed this program because we've blown it in the past," Ms. Hoffman says. "There's too much misunderstanding about our programs and this is too important a program to allow that to happen."

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