

Our opinion

The \$250,000 question

It's rather refreshing to hear state officials admit that efforts to win community support for establishment of group homes for the mentally retarded have, in the past, been badly mishandled.

The group home program itself is of unquestionable importance. It is clear that all but the most profoundly retarded individuals can benefit from living in small, community-based homes rather than in large institutions; there is no question, either, that retarded persons can receive much better care in group homes than they could ever have hoped for in institutions.

But in the few years that the state's deinstitutionalization program has been moving at full speed, several serious problems have become apparent. The most serious problem has been one of communications, and the blame for that must be placed squarely at the feet of state officials.

Officials, in the past, never sought to explain the importance or merits

of the deinstitutionalization program; most of their time was spent defending the program against misconceptions — such as that the retarded are dangerous.

The defensive posture was accepted almost willingly by the state. While on defense, officials saw no need to seek community input toward the selection of possible sites for group homes; in fact, since residents of a given community were seen as the enemy, they sometimes were kept in the dark about planned group homes for as long as possible.

There has been a gradual shift away from the defensive attitude as officials have recognized a community's cooperation is far more valuable than its opposition.

Now, in an effort to further improve its ability to communicate with those living in neighborhoods being asked to accept group homes, the state is paying a consultant \$250,000 to improve the communications techniques of those officials

who must deal directly with community residents.

The state's image in the area of deinstitutionalization needs some polishing, to be sure, and the group home program could only benefit from the assistance of individuals trained to offer community residents a balanced presentation rather than a solely defensive one.

But a trained corps of pitchmen alone will not make the establishment of group homes much less difficult a process than it now is.

There is a need for total candor by the state and for total involvement of the community in the process, from beginning to end. Residents of a particular community should no longer learn that a given site is under consideration as a group home; they should be asked, rather, where in the neighborhood a group home might be established.

Whether such a process can succeed is the \$250,000 question now confronting the state.