

Parents mull service to handicapped young

More than 65 parents gathered last night on the Wagner College Campus, Grymes Hill, to discuss the service and program needs of their handicapped children.

The meeting, the first of its kind to be arranged by the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council, was called to evaluate service priorities which will eventually find their way into next year's city budget.

A questionnaire distributed at the start of the meeting in the communications building listed more than a dozen services that parents were asked to rank according to need.

Included were transportation, medical and dental needs, educational needs, drop-in and respite-care centers, home-maker and counseling services and financial assistance.

A number of parents complained last night that they had a difficult time tracking down services available to their children. They said they found that

hospitals and other institutions often do not make adequate referrals.

After Dr. Gerald Spielman of the Developmental Disabilities Center at Wagner provided a list of phone numbers where parents could get information about programs, camps for the handicapped and doctors and dentists experienced in treating handicapped and disabled persons, a father commented, "You know, I really don't need those numbers now, but three years ago, when my daughter was born, I could have used them."

The father went on to explain that he did not know and was not told about groups who provided counseling and guidance for parents of the handicapped.

In the recent past, the Staten Island Developmental Center has sought, in response to the Willowbrook Consent Decree, to establish community residences for former residents and the handicapped who have always lived at home. Some neighborhoods chosen as "host" communities have reacted in fear and opposed the group homes.

Several parents asked about educating the community, whose fears may "follow from ignorance," according to Sonia Braniff, regional council chairman.

Mrs. Braniff said, however, that much of the council's effort to enlighten groups about the retarded have been met by indifference. She said the council has sent "hundreds of letters" to Island Parent-Teacher Associations and other organizations requesting speaking time and has received few responses.

Several parents asked about respite care or drop-in programs, where parents can leave children under supervised care for a matter of hours or even days.

Respite care, one father admitted frankly, gave parents "immediate relief" from the constant burden of caring for a handicapped child and also helped prepare the child for placement in a group home.

Carolyn Saberg, outpatient-intake coordinator for the Staten Island Developmental Center, reported that a drop-in center currently being set up on the Willowbrook center grounds may open, "hopefully," in six to eight weeks. Parents may contact Ms. Saberg at 698-1440, extension 545, for more information.

Making last night's parents' session a monthly meeting was also discussed.

—MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA