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No action taken on sites

Board 'educating' itself on group homes

By DIANE C. LORE

There are three of them open in the Community Board 1 area on the North Shore, and a list of sites under consideration in the Community Board 3 area on the South Shore.

Now it's Community Board 2's turn to take on the touchy issue of approving sites in the mid-Island area for group homes for the mentally retarded.

To that end, the board has been trying to "educate" members and civic leaders on the concept by inviting speakers from agencies serving the mentally retarded.

What is mental retardation? What is a group home? What kind of residents will live there? What is the history of group homes for the retarded on Staten Island? These were some of the basic questions addressed at the board's monthly meeting last Tuesday, and again last night during a meeting with civic leaders.

"Basically, our problem is that no one knows what we're all about," said Sonia Braniff, chairman of the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council.

A basic point of confusion, Mrs. Braniff noted, is the distinct difference between mental retardation and mental illness.

"A definition of a mentally retarded person is simply that the person does not have the ability to function at a normal level of intelligence," said John Tillou of the Staten Island Developmental Center.

Mental retardation, he said, is chronic, and often caused by a genetic disorder at birth or physical damage to the brain. There is no "treatment" for mental retardation, only special education programs to help a person function to the best of his limited abilities. By contrast, Tillou said, mental illness can be brought on by emotional factors, and can be treated and often reversed through psychiatric help.

At one point, more than 5,000 mentally retarded people occupied the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook, Tillou noted. But under the Willowbrook Consent Decree, and plans for the decentralization of the developmental center, the institution must be phased down to less than 300 beds.

Retarded residents from other boroughs have been sent back to their boroughs to be placed in group homes. Each community board must open sev-

eral neighborhood-based homes to serve retarded residents that live in the board area.

Each community board on Staten Island will eventually have eight group homes, according to state estimates. The homes will be for Staten Island residents only.

"We won't be bringing in people from Manhattan or any other borough," Mrs. Braniff said. "In fact, the residents will be from the board area."

The homes will be for retarded residents only. "Our program is not to be confused with so-called group homes by the state Division of Youth or any other community-based program," Tillou said.

In concept, the group home aims to teach a retarded person to function on his own in the community. "Like any parent, parents of a mentally retarded child won't live forever," Mrs. Braniff said. "What will happen to a mentally retarded person when their parents die? Will they be placed in an institution? Or will they be able to take care of themselves?"

An average of 10 residents will live in each home, and each home will have a live-in supervisor, according to state proposals. Residents will work days in sheltered workshops, and return home at night for leisure activities, "just like anyone else," Tillou said.

Each group home, Tillou said, will be monitored by a community advisory board.

In the Community Board 2 area, a committee studying the group home proposals hopes to scatter the homes throughout the area of the board's jurisdiction. "We're trying to avoid 'clustering,'" said board chairman Joseph Manifold.

The board is attempting to avoid placing the group homes in neighborhoods that already contain a number of community-based or health-care facilities.

Neighborhoods in the Board 2 area include Arrochar, Bloomfield, Bulls Head, Chelsea, Dongan Hills, Egbertville, Emerson Hill, Grant City, Grasmere, Light-house Hill, Midland Beach, New Dorp, New Springville, Oakwood, Ocean Breeze, Richmond, South Beach, Tott Hill, Travis and Willowbrook.

The board has not taken any action on the selection of sites for the group homes. It plans a public hearing before the matter is voted upon.

"We won't be bringing in people from Manhattan or any other borough," Sonia Braniff, chairman of the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council, said of those to be placed in Island group homes. "In fact, the residents will be from the board area."