

Plan to rent apartments could reduce need for group homes, official says

By DIANE C. LORE

A state official said last night that the number of proposed community-based group homes for the mentally retarded could be reduced if another community-based program is successful.

Sixteen group homes proposed for mid-Island and South Shore communities could be "renegotiated, or possibly decreased or modified," Elin Howe, director of the Borough Developmental Services Office, told Borough Board members last night during a meeting in Borough Hall.

She said her office was considering placing three or four mentally retarded residents at a time into local apartments, which could reduce the need for so many group homes.

Staten Island community board leaders, meanwhile, said last night they were miffed by the state's failure to notify them before signing leases for two Island apartments housing a total of six mentally retarded persons.

Miss Howe said the state does not need community board approval for the apartments because they house less than four people. She added, however, that she did notify the boards of the two apartment sites as a courtesy.

The apartments, she explained, are

not classified as group homes. Group homes normally house eight to 10 people. Selection of sites for group homes must be done in accordance with guidelines established by the state Legislature. The guidelines state that community boards must participate in selecting sites for the group homes.

Under a 1975 court order, the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, is to be phased out, with residents shifted into community-based facilities. State plans call for an estimated eight group homes in each of the Island's three community board areas.

Three mentally retarded residents moved in Friday to an apartment on Ocean Ave. in South Beach, in the Community Board 2 area. Three persons are expected to move within the next two weeks to an apartment on Fox Beach Rd., Oakwood Beach, in the Community Board 3 area.

In both instances, Miss Howe said she met with members of the immediate community, who offered no objections, she added.

Richard McGivney, chairman of Community board 3, in a letter distributed to

Borough Board members, said Miss Howe had created a breach of confidence by failing to notify the board.

"We feel that there is a moral obligation here, one of which at least is keeping the other abreast of what is going on," McGivney wrote.

"We feel, in this case, that the Staten Island Developmental Center has forced a breach in this very sensitive area of communications, which infringes upon the credibility and integrity of Community Board 3," he concluded.

"We did not mean to challenge the community boards," Miss Howe replied. "We did not mean this to be an underhanded process. I've instructed my staff to be upfront and candid with neighbors about our programs," Miss Howe said.

She agreed to supply the Borough Board and community boards with minutes of BDSO meetings, "so you will have some idea of what's going on."

Community board leaders also expressed concern over the problem of "clustering" — placing group homes and community-based facilities in neighborhoods already having several health-care or community-based centers.

Joseph Manifold, chairman of Community Board 2, said a board committee was mapping each community in the board area, listing each health-care and community-based facility, so that "these group homes could be evenly distributed throughout the board area."

Lillian Prado, district service manager for Board 2, noted South Beach Psychiatric Center and two nursing homes.

"Part of our problem," Miss Howe said, "is no matter where we locate, there's never a 'good' area to put these in."

An apartment situation, she commented "might seem a little more viable" to community residents. "Community residents might be better able to accept two or three retarded people next door than eight or 10," she said.