

Retarded make good neighbors, U.S. judge says

By DIANE C. LORE

Staten Island homeowners "have nothing to fear" from group homes for the mentally retarded in their neighborhoods, a federal judge said yesterday.

"The retarded are really very gentle people. They have shown great improvement when placed in a community setting. People have nothing to fear from them," Brooklyn Federal Judge John R. Bartels, who has ruled on matters concerning the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, since 1976, told the Advance.

The 1975 court decision called the Willowbrook Consent Decree, Bartels stressed, "specifically calls for the deinstitutionalization of the residents of Willowbrook and their placement in more normal and less restrictive living conditions in the community."

The judge was the speaker last night at a dinner in the Crystal Room, South Beach, honoring volunteer workers at the developmental center. More than 300 volunteers who contributed more than 14,000 hours to the center were recognized for their service during the annual affair.

Bartels, in a 30-minute prepared statement, noted that expansion and active recruitment of a volunteer program at the center was mandated in the consent decree.

Among the many functions volunteers perform, he said, is their "advocacy within the community."

"The public advocacy function is essential because community placement is the ultimate goal of the consent judgment.

"Since the volunteers work with residents first hand and see the conditions and improvements made at Willowbrook, they are in the best position to educate the public and to counteract the hostility which occasionally has greeted efforts to establish community homes for the mentally retarded," he said.

The judge devoted the bulk of his remarks to reviewing the historic court decree.

Quoting passages from the text of the decree, Bartels said the constitutional rights of the retarded "are not optimal or ideal standards, nor are they just custodial standards. They are based on the recognition that retarded persons, regardless of the degree of handicapping conditions, are capable of physical, intellectual, emotional and social growth."

The consent decree, he noted, mandates that retarded clients be provided with at least six hours of programmed activity each day and requires specific ratios of attendants, supervisors and staff to clients.

"Let me assure you," he added, "that the purpose of the consent judgment and the obligation of the court has been and will be to provide and enforce the best possible services that can be rendered to the retarded."

Bartels, who is 81 and has been on the bench for a quarter of a century, said in an interview before his speech that he considered his work on the Willowbrook case one of the highlights of his career. Referring to the retarded, he said: "I consider it a great opportunity to serve these people."