

Care for retarded keeps on declining

I read that under a negotiated agreement providing for special hospitalization, a severely retarded 15-year-old boy confessed to setting fire to a shopping-bag lady as she slept in a midtown subway station. If treatment proves successful within 10 years, he would be allowed to withdraw a plea of attempted murder and enter a new plea to a lesser charge that would make him eligible for assignment to a halfway house.

Twenty-five years ago, Willowbrook State School was the hope of the retarded. The dream was that the retarded would be trained to reach their potential. Staten Islanders welcomed them. Most families on Staten Island have at least one member who has either worked in Willowbrook or volunteered services in some way.

As the years went by, our taxes have gone up, but the quality of care for the retarded has become the disgrace of the community. Cutting costs at the expense of those least able to protest has become our new goal. We have found that a way to cut costs is to empty out our facilities for the mentally ill. We are told by the experts that the mentally ill do best out in the community. We see them huddled and frightened in cheap rooming houses without any supervision. We see them carrying shopping bags in our great City of New York — people without a place to go, helpless and alone. They have been dumped by cost-conscious politicians, and we, the taxpayers, are trying to look the other way.

Now the next group of unfortunates to be dumped are the retarded. They pose more of a problem. The profoundly retarded often can't talk, although they shriek out their agony loud and clear. They are often not toileted, so they would certainly not be welcomed by any self-respecting cheap rooming house owner. They often can't feed themselves and we can't very well have them starving on the streets in front of City Hall. What is the best way to "place" these people. The way has been proposed to Community Board II. Put six adults with an I.Q. of 25 or less right next to a middle-class homeowner. The silent majority will remain silent. The middle-class homeowner will close his ears as he sits in his backyard and hears the cries of the retarded. He will not complain when Willowbrook smells pervade

his area. His children will be told to be quiet when they see the retarded being pulled or pushed to their daily "workshop." And if the house selected is a fire hazard without any backyard and no possibility of recreational or parking facilities, the silent middle class won't say much.

Well, that's where you are wrong! Our legislators had better wake up before we pull the plug on their gravy train. We have built with our tax money facilities for the mentally ill and for the mentally retarded. We have lots of unused state land. Conduct your pilot projects there, not in our backyards.

We pay for the care of the mentally ill and the mentally retarded. We pay the salaries of those who care for them. We pay the salaries of our so-called representatives. But our wishes or the real interests of the handicapped are not being attended to.

We want Willowbrook to be the hope it once was. We want to be proud of that facility. Let's do what we have to at Willowbrook to accomplish that goal. We don't want every community on Staten Island to have its own little Willowbrook.

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