

Staten Island

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Director Elin Howe talks with staff about program giving temporary shelter to retarded.



Page 1
Page 2

New programs set to aid the retarded

By MARY ENGELS

IN AN ATTEMPT to provide better service for the mentally retarded, the Staten Island Development Center has introduced two new programs, one for respite care and the other for drop-in day care. Elin Howe, the director of the center, explained.

"For a long while, we have been desirous of providing respite care for families of retarded or developmentally disabled people who wish to take some time off from caring for their loved ones."

"It is a service that has been provided elsewhere but not on Staten Island. It is one we generally try to have away from the center itself. The reason being, some people have a fear of leaving their family in an institutional setting.

"However, because we were delayed at being able to put the plan into action at the Diana Trail House because of local opposition, we decided to begin it at the center."

Drop-in day-care center

Building 50 on the center's grounds was chosen as the place to begin the respite care and to introduce what Howe called "an innovative program in the form of a drop-in day care center."

"A respite facility can take care of a client for a week or two while the family vacations, she explained. "Day care can provide for those who wish to stop for an hour or two and know their loved ones will be looked out for. We're pleased at these programs and hope they will be utilized."

She noted they still plan to go ahead with fixing up the state-owned Diana Trail House which was previously the home of the director of the Institute for Basic Research for Mental Retardation.

"There are those in the community who still feel the stigma of Willowbrook and would rather bring their family to a house than to the center," she said.

The center is under the gun to lower its resident population to 250 by April 30, 1981, by a Willowbrook court decree.

Seek group home sites

For the past several months sites have been sought for possible group homes in the district of Community Planning Boards 2 and 3.

"There have to be at least five homes in each board area, to house from 6 to 10 clients," Howe said. It has not been an easy task, she explained because of fear in the community.

"Fear of the unknown—the retarded. The community has heard all the horror stories of Willowbrook and fear it will spill out into their neighborhoods.

"Fear that their property values will diminish if group homes are seen in their neighborhood. Yet a survey done by Professor Jules Wolpert for Princeton University showed that 1,600 homes in 42 communities where group homes were placed did not drop in value.

"We are trying to alleviate these fears but Staten Island is lagging behind in acceptance, which is sad, for it is their own they are turning away."

Violence and harassment

Those who have chosen to sell or rent their houses to the state for use as group homes have run in to threats of violence and harassment, according to officials of the center.

At the recent meeting of Community Planning Board 2's Health and Hospital Committee, it was brought out that one home and one alternate site in Grasmere had been withdrawn because "of threats."

On the other hand, several community leaders feel they should have a say in the site selection. They feel they had been bypassed by the state in this regard.

Present at the board hearing were some members of the Grasmere Home Owners Association. They said they had first learned of the group homes as a sort of fait accompli.

"We didn't even now they were contemplating such a thing on our locale," said N. Joe Sciacca, the chairman of the ad hoc committee of the association.

Focus on city property

Sciacca said his members planned to present their own list to the state.

"There are quite a few city properties they could have picked," he declared.

Home owner Joseph Dennon charged that the state failed in its commitment at Willowbrook originally.

"It became a national disaster" he said. "Why should the community have to suffer for their failure by being the scapegoats taking in these people in the community?"

Ed Hassett, the director of Resource Development for the N.Y. State Department of Mental Retardation, said, "The state is willing to listen to input from the community but time is of the essence in selecting sites."

Meanwhile, Board 2 will vote June 19 on whether or not to go along with the recommendation by its Health and Hospital Committee of three of the four sites already suggested.



Building 50 at Staten Island Developmental Center

News photos by Jim Romano



Instructor St. Clair Williams hands one of respite center clients cup of coffee.

Page 1
1/1/78