

Retardation council member speaks out

Handicapped's right in community stressed

By SCOTT A. SMITH

A member of a group that monitors programs for the handicapped last night criticized Staten Island residents who oppose group homes, saying the handicapped have "the right to live where they desire."

Lillian Hall, a member of the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council, told council members, "The opponents of group homes have engaged in everything from sophisticated legal maneuvers to random acts of violence" to block the opening of homes in their neighborhoods.

Mrs. Hall, chairwoman of the council's community residence committee,

was one of many speakers who addressed nearly 50 private agency operators and concerned parents and residents, at a meeting of the council in the Institute of Basic Research, Willowbrook.

She said the reason community residents are opposed to the establishment of group homes is because they are "misinformed." She said some residents believe "unjust myths concerning the developmentally disabled which feed public fears."

Several council members stressed the importance of making the public more aware of what it means to be mentally retarded or developmentally disabled, as a way toward alleviating problems

caused by ignorance and misinformation.

Mental health experts say developmentally disabled individuals are no different from those without disabilities, except that the disabled may be slower to achieve their potential. Studies have shown that the rate of violent crime is lower among the developmentally disabled population than the general population.

Joan Hodum, vice chairwoman of the council, explained that group homes are for handicapped persons unable to live at home. For them, she said, the best alternative is to live in home-like settings and to attend special programs in the community.

"There's a lot more to living than a roof over your head, food in your mouth and something on your back," she said.

Mrs. Hodum stressed the need for vocal support in favor of group homes to offset the opposition. "We're going to need the support of everyone if we're going to break the barrier and get people placed into community residences."

"Once we're out in the community, and people see that there is nothing to fear, everything will be all right — but the problem is getting out there," she said.

Charles Browning, Staten Island manager for the city Bureau of Mental Retardation and Developmentally Disabled Services, told the gathering, "The publicity you see is about proposed homes and not about homes that are already there and functioning."

Rhona Hanshaft, director of United Cerebral Palsy of New York City, suggested that homes be planned for only three or four residents, "because the number of residents in the homes is what scares the community."

Peggy Swir, a resident of West Brighton, said that because of community opposition, she feared for the safety of her children if they were placed in a group home.

John Tillou, a state official representing the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, said the only type of problems the state has encountered

with group homes is setting them up, usually over vociferous opposition. He said there had never been a case of anyone actually harming a resident.

Other areas of concern raised at the meeting included the availability of funds for continuing existing programs and adding new ones.

Sonia Braniff, chairwoman of the council, said: "The funding mechanisms are not really what they should be for the community-based client. Hopefully, now that we've really started to lobby, more funds will become available."

Also identified as areas that need improvement on Staten Island were programs dealing with day activities, infant stimulation, recreational needs, religious needs, parental education, transportation, prevention and good childhood nutrition.

Mrs. Hodum ended the meeting by saying, "If we work together with a sense of cooperation and if we're strong in our lobbying attempts, we will be able to provide the clients with the services they need."