Community placement: Only time will tell

Two residents find working with their hands can be both fun and constructive.

S.I. Adva... ...by Tony Carnavante

Residents of group homes learn their way around household chores, such as doing the dishes.

By DIANE C. LORE

The 1980s will tell if the sweeping changes mandated by the Willowbrook Consent Decree will result in the intended improvements in living conditions for Staten Island's mentally retarded and handicapped residents.

Whether the state can meet court-ordered deadlines to move retarded and handicapped persons out of large institutions; whether alternatives to institutional care will be successful, and whether homeowners will accept the retarded as neighbors in their communities are all questions that will be answered within the next few years.

The Willowbrook Consent Decree, a 1975 federal court judgment, mandates the state empty the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, and other state institutions for the retarded of all but the most profoundly retarded residents by May 1981. They are to be placed in the community, in group homes or apartments with a family-style setting.

The consent decree evolved from a suit brought by parents of Willowbrook residents in response to overcrowding and wretched living conditions at the state institution for the retarded. The institution's population peaked at more than 6,000 in the 1960s and has gradually been reduced to about 1,400. Under the consent decree the population must be phased down to 250. Whether the state will meet the consent decree deadline is anyone's guess. Efforts apparently are being hampered on all sides by feuding and disagreements, red tape and community opposition to placing the retarded in their neighborhood.

The state's Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) and the Willowbrook Review Panel, the court-appointed monitor of the developmental center, are currently feuding over the state's latest proposal.

State Mental Retardation Commissioner James E. Introne proposes to transfer at least 1,000 patients from state institutions, including the developmental center, into community residences by March 31, 1981. This would more than triple the rate at which residents are currently being placed into the community.

The review panel has termed the proposal "irresponsible and dangerous." They argue that the quality of services to the handicapped and retarded would be sacrificed if the state were to go ahead with the plan.

"Our feeling is that placing so many people over the next 16 months is more than the state is capable of doing with any degree of responsibility," said Christopher Hansen, an Amercican Civil Liberties Union lawyer involved in the issue.

The state argues it could be rendered in contempt of court unless it follows through with the plan. "Anyone who tells me it won't work, has the obligation to tell me what goal is realizable," Introne said.

State officials have asked for court sanction of their plan and are awaiting a hearing before Brooklyn federal court Judge John R. Bartels, who has ruled on matters concerning the developmental center since 1976.

Meanwhile, as the state and the review panel battle over the feasibility of increasing placement intoo community-based care facilities, the communities are actively opposing the facilities.

In the Board 1 area, a moratorium against further community-based care facilities is in effect. Board 1, which covers the North Shore, already has two successful group homes where clients go to work during the day, enjoy recreation programs and attend evening classes at the College of Staten Island.

In Board 2 , which covers the mid-Island area, the board attempted to seek a moratorium on group homes last year, claiming the area is "oversaturated" with community-based care facilities.

Two civic groups in the Board 2 area have filed court suits to stop the state from opening group homes in their neighborhoods. Arguments are still being heard on the case.

Board 3 on the South Shore, has approved several group home sites, over the objections of homeowners at public hearings last year.

While residents protest group home sites, the state, meanwhile, is looking into other alternatives for community placement. One alternative involves placing several mentally retarded residents at a time into local apartments.

According to Elin Howe, director of the Borough Developmental Service Office, the apartments 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 say the community boards must participate in selecting sites for group homes.

Apartments, however, do not need the approval of the community board, according to Miss Howe. Each apartment can house three or four retarded residents.

At least two Island apartments have been leased by the state in the last year.

In another development, the state may be required to offer funding to the natural parents of former developmental center residents who want to care for their children at home.

A court decision last month by Judge Bartels, concerns only those persons now or once institutionalized in the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook, but court observers say the ruling may open the way, for the first time, for the government to subsidize in-home care for the handicapped throughout the state.

Officials estimate that the cost of implementing a statewide home-care program would run into hundreds of millions of dollars — far more than the cost of setting up group homes or apartments. Supporters of home-care funding, however, say it is one of the best alternatives for a handicapped or retarded child because the child can remain in a family setting.

In the future, experts say, the Willowbrook Consent Decree will be judged not on the basis of how rapidly it succeeded in emptying the state's institutions, but by how much it contributed to overall better care and services for the retarded and handicapped.