

Foster grandparents are needed



Charles K. Smith (photo left) works with youngster as Nettle Evans, coordinator of foster grandparents' program, looks on.

Bob Koller/Daily News

By MARY ENGELS

IF YOU ARE 60 years of age or older, have a warm place in your heart for children in need and could use some extra income, the Staten Island Developmental Center wants you.

"Foster grandparents are one of our greatest assets," said Mrs. Nettie Evans, a foster grandparent and senior-companion coordinator at the center.

A foster grandparent program began a few years ago at the center with the purpose of providing the elderly with low incomes an opportunity to make some extra money and to help disadvantaged

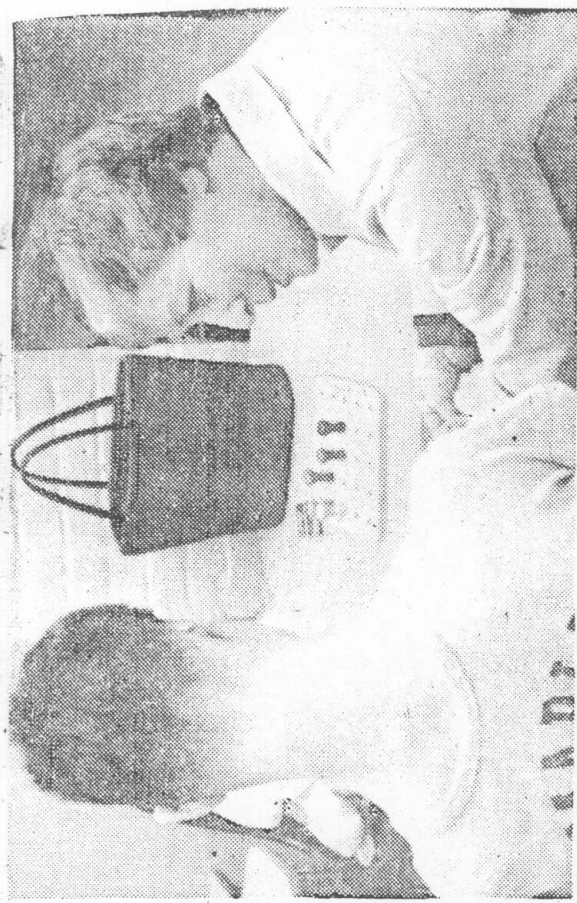
children, such as the mentally retarded.

"They work with our residents under the age of 21," Evans said. "It is usually on a one-to-one basis and they generally help the residents by preparing them for the daily living activities."

Provide companionship

They also provide companionship, emotional support and encouragement to the residents in all activities in which they are involved, she said.

"The difference between the foster grandparent and the senior companion is that the senior companion cares for residents over 21 years old by helping them make the transition to community living."



Marie Fecci, a foster grandparent, helps young man with learning aids at Staten Island Developmental Center.

Both programs are in need of more volunteers, she said.

"We have funding for 50 foster grandparents and only 35 are in the program," she said. "As for the senior companions, there is funding for 30 persons and there are only 15 volunteers. If we don't get more people, we stand to lose the funding money."

Reassured on income

Mrs. Evans said that the elderly who join the program need not fear that they will lose the small income they already have. "They will be provided with a stipend and other benefits which enables them to participate without losing anything," she said.

One drawback that the program is faced with is the time that the volunteers must spend in it, four hours a day, five days a week. Many elderly are reluctant to commit themselves to that length of time. Some have asked if they can serve less time but the rules cannot be bent, she said.

Since the program started it has mutually benefited both parties, she said. "It gives the elderly an opportunity to help those young people who are mentally retarded and are often deprived of normal relationships with adults. At the same time the residents often find an advocate in their foster grandparent or senior companion, who will call us when they

think something is wrong or not being done properly," she said.

Jo Morritt, director of the deaf and blind program at the center, praised the foster grandparents for their help.

"They tend to give the residents that extra special care as the youngsters learn about the activities of daily living. It is gratifying watching how our residents often respond to the foster grandparent quicker than those on staff."

Glad she joined

Mrs. Mary Snyder, 66, a foster grandparent assigned to the deaf and blind program, said she was pleased that children await her arrival every day. "It makes me feel glad I joined the program. At first I was skeptical and wondered if I could take working with the retarded. Now I consider them my children, my grandchildren I mean."

Mrs. Olga Bowry, 62, said, "You get to grow quite fond of the residents. Actually, I look forward to coming to the center every day. I love working with the children. All I want to do is make them happy."

Anyone interested in becoming a foster grandparent or senior companion who can fill the requirements (low income men and women over 60 who are no longer in the regular work force) should contact... Nettie Evans at the center.