

Once kids are in group homes the problem is getting out again

By MARC DAVIS

They've been neglected or abused. They won't go to school. They suffer from low self-esteem. They are essentially homeless, whether or not they actually have parents. They may even have criminal tendencies.

They come from homes in all of the five boroughs. Many wind up in family court, are sent to institutions or agencies, and — if they're lucky — they wind up home again.

They are the more than 22,000 youths in the New York City child care system and the question is: What can the government — or anybody — do for them?

There was a time, not so long ago, that institutions were thought to be the answer. Today, the trend is turning away from that alternative.

Now, community-based treatment — group homes — are thought to be the answer. But there are problems there, too.

Nobody wants a group home in his community. Public opposition is at a "danger level," as one child care official put it.

And besides, the economics are overwhelming. The traditional private, usually religion-based, child care agency is virtually extinct. Nearly all are now run with more than 90 percent government funding. And lately, that funding has become even more uncertain.

Even if the entire child care field were to shift overnight to group homes, officials in the field aren't in agreement on how to run them. Child care isn't so much a science as an art in which styles vary widely.

Given those constraints, where can child care in New York go from here?

In the first place, officials are trying to break what one agency director called "the trap."

"In the past, the child care field was a trap for youngsters," said Reinaldo Galindo, director of Staten

Island services for New York Foundling Hospital, which operates four group homes on Staten Island. "They came in, but they couldn't get out."

In other words, children would often find themselves separated from their families for treatment — either by choice or by court order — and never make their way back.

To a certain extent, the "trap" still exists. Many youths placed in care of the city's Office of Special Services for Children (SSC) eventually find themselves in institutions or group homes and never are reunited with their families. Sometimes it is unavoidable.

"All children cannot be returned home. That's unrealistic," said Leonard Jackson, group home director for the Catholic Guardian Society, which operates 10 homes on Staten Island.

The typical youth referred to an agency by the courts or SSC comes from a bad home, where support may be slight and hostility great. Sometimes the parents reject the child. Or it may be the other way around.

"Usually, you're dealing with angry parents and angry kids," said Nat Yalowitz, director of Geller House, a short-term group home in Arrochar. "It's a volatile situation."

Geller House, a branch of the Jewish Child Care Association, houses about 25 youths, aged 13 to 16, for up to six weeks. While they are there, the staff tries to resolve the youths' problems and, hopefully, reunite them with their families.

But they are not always successful. About half the kids who enter Geller House eventually wind up in a longer-term institution or group home.

"One of our major goals is to keep the kid out of placement altogether," Yalowitz said. "But it's not always possible to reunite the family. Sometimes, it's like trying to squeeze toothpaste back into the tube."

"We hope to encourage a new sense of hope with these kids. When kids and families are in serious trouble, the last thing they want to feel is there's no hope. When you begin to feel hopeless, you begin to shrivel, physically and emotionally," he said.

Nevertheless, the "trap" can sometimes be lengthy, even today. At Mission of the Immaculate Virgin, Mount Loretto, for example, residents are not supposed to stay any longer than two years. Yet officials there said it is not unusual for residents to remain there several years.

In smaller group homes run by other agencies, "temporary" placement often becomes a multi-year engagement, officials said.

Is spending several years in New York's child care system a bad thing? Not necessarily, but it all depends on where a youth is placed. Quality varies tremendously between agencies, and sometimes even between different homes within the same agency.

In May 1979, City Council President Carol Bellamy paid surprise visits to two Catholic Guardian Society group homes on Staten Island. Surprisingly, she found in one a "caring, homelike atmosphere," and in the other "filth."

But if quality in group homes varies greatly, most child care officials agree that the atmosphere and treatment available in group homes is preferable to that of larger institutions.

"There is definitely a move to place kids in the community," said Anita Delaney, Special Services for Children spokeswoman. "Large institutions simply aren't being built anymore."

First of three parts. Tomorrow: The trend toward group homes.