

Child care officials seek smaller facilities to give needed love, attention

By MARC DAVIS

Five years ago, officials in the mental retardation field recognized the need for community-based treatment when the state issued the so-called Willowbrook decree.

The decree, which ordered the placement of nearly all residents of the Staten Island Developmental Center at Willowbrook into community-based group homes, noted that treatment in Willowbrook and similar institutions in the state was not adequate to meet the needs of the retarded.

Similarly, officials in the child care field are now trying to move youths out of institutions and into smaller group homes. Many child care officials, for example, characterize care at Mission of the Immaculate Virgin, Mount Loretto — with its 315 youth residents — as "impersonal" and "bureaucratic."

The typical youth in New York City's child care system has been neglected or abused, comes from an unhappy home environment and may have already had a run-in with the law.

Love and attention, officials say, is the first thing one of these youths needs — and perhaps the last thing they get at a large institution. Hence the need for group homes.

Nat Yalowitz runs Geller House, a short-term, 25-unit group home in Arrochar under the auspices of the Jewish Child Care Association.

"Geller House is smaller, tighter, more easy to administrate," Yalowitz said. "If we had 200 kids here, who knows what would be going on. It's pretty tough to keep an eye on 200 kids."

Paul Elisha, a spokesman for the state's Division for Youth, said that in many large youth institutions, "You do have cases where there are too many kids, not enough staff and

(Continued on Page 4)

not enough money, where they don't give the kind of care they should.

"In our division, there is a trend, particularly for kids not considered dangerous, to try to program them out of institutions and keep them in the community," he added.

Youth group homes typically house anywhere from seven to 10 youths and usually have live-in "parents." The atmosphere is more homelike than in an institution and the care more personal, child care officials said.

And yet, officials added, not all youths are prepared to live in group homes. The more violent, emotionally or mentally disturbed youths must be placed in institutions. Most group home agencies are careful to take "only the better kids," as one official put it.

"Group homes are a treatment modality that not every kid can use," Yalowitz said. "Assigning kids is very subjective, and we're not always right."

"If group homes and community residences are so desirable, why aren't there more of them? Money, for one thing, many agree. And, of course, there is the ever-growing community opposition to group homes.

This, for example, is the saga of a group home that almost nobody wanted.

For example, back in early 1979, the Jesuit Program for Living and Learning proposed two youth group homes, each accommodating about 10 youths, for Sylvia St., Eltingville.

The homes would have been the first Jesuit homes in New York City under a program in conjunction with Xavier High School in Manhattan. But it was not fated to be.



On Feb. 7, 1979, about 80 angry neighbors showed up for a community board hearing to vehemently oppose the group homes. Among other things, the neighbors cited poor drainage in the area, lack of sewers, devaluation of property and an ingrained problem with delinquent youths as reasons for opposing the group homes.

Three weeks later, the Jesuits withdrew plans for the Eltingville homes.

In March 1979, the Jesuits decided to try to put the group homes — the same group homes rejected in Eltingville — on Chester Ave., Huguenot. Again, the cards were against them.

On April 3, 1979, about 50 neighbors vehemently opposed the group homes, claiming they would undermine the residential character of the neighborhood. The Jesuits withdrew.

Strike two.

Finally, the Jesuits proposed putting the group homes at 30 and 40 Ackerman St., Great Kills. In September 1979, neighbors did NOT object, much to everyone's surprise.

And so construction of the two group homes was begun in April and is now virtually complete, Jesuit officials said. The homes could open for operation in February or March, and Jesuit officials are hoping the community remains receptive to them.

"We decided if the kids weren't going to be accepted in Eltingville or Huguenot, maybe they'd be better off elsewhere," said spokesman John Durney.

Meanwhile, Jesuit officials are keeping their fingers crossed. For other group home agencies, crossed fingers may not be enough.

Second of three parts. Tomorrow: What will the neighbors say?