

Community opposition casting shadow over group homes

By MARC DAVIS

Trying to put a new group home for youths on Staten Island is like trying to put an elephant through a keyhole.

That is, it's nearly impossible. And if you try to press either one too hard, you'll only wind up making a lot of noise and attracting a lot of attention.

The issue of group homes on Staten Island has historically been a noisy one. No sooner is one proposed than dozens of neighbors, civic associations and community boards raise a collective cry of "Stop!" Usually, the proposal is dropped and the issue goes away ... until the next group home is proposed.

And yet, there is a need. Many officials in the child care field agree that care and treatment for homeless, neglected, abused or socially disadvantaged youths is in need of improvement.

"In a way, the whole network of social services somewhere along the line is unable to cope with these kids," said Paul Elisha, state Division for Youth spokesman. "It's failed them in some way."

What happens when a youth group home is suggested for an Island community? In the recent past, group home controversies have gone like this:

¶ For three months in 1977, angry Castleton Corners residents vehemently opposed a proposed group home for youths on Manor Rd. At first, Community Board 2 approved the proposal. After much community pressure, approval was reconsidered. Finally, the home was killed — not by neighbors or the community board, but by the house's owner.

¶ A Jesuit youth group home was proposed in February 1979 for Eltingville. After opposition, the Jesuits proposed a Huguenot site. When that, too, met opposition, a Great Kills site was selected and construction finally began — 14 months after the original proposal.

¶ Just three months ago, Community Board 2 debated the board's advisory role on group homes. At one point, a board member jumped up, pointed an accusing finger at a fel-

low board member across the table and said, "How would you like a group home in YOUR community?"

To put it bluntly, group homes simply aren't welcome on Staten Island.

"It's a middle class mentality," complained Leonard Jackson, group homes director for the Catholic Guardian Society, which runs 10 Island group homes. "Nobody wants a group home in their community. They just don't want to hear about it.

"But the bottom line is there is a need for them," he continued. "Now, does society want to accept this need?"

The dilemma goes something like this: Large-scale, long-term institutions — the wave of the past — are now being phased out in favor of community-based treatment and group homes. Group homes take a youth out of the setting that caused his problems and expose him to "appropriate" middle class values and responsibility, the theory goes.

The trouble, of course, is that the very communities in which a disadvantaged youth is most likely to encounter "appropriate" values are the same communities that most strenuously object to group homes.

"Of course there are a lot of group homes on Staten Island," Jackson said. "Staten Island is an ideal setting."

Many Staten Islanders, however, have long complained that the Island has more than its fair share of group homes. "For a while, Staten Island was a dumping ground for kids all over the state," agreed Reinaldo Galindo, director of Staten Island services for New York Foundling Hospital, which operates four group homes on Staten Island.

The most recent figures available indicate that the Island houses about 13 percent of the city's youth group home population, while the Island itself comprises only about 4 percent of the city's overall population. This simple fact caused much debate and many cries of "oversaturation" about three years ago.

The debate continues to this day.

"I think community opposition is getting worse, almost to the point of danger," Galindo said.

In fact, not even officials in the child care field are totally agreed that a child is best served by taking him out of his home community. The New York Foundling Hospital only recently began a program to keep troubled youths in group homes within their own boroughs.

"I say, let's take care of our own kids," Galindo said. "Kids from Jersey St. or Bay St. don't belong in the Bronx. They belong on Staten Island."

The debate is further confused by the growth in number of group homes for the mentally retarded, largely because of the state decree to virtually empty the Staten Island Developmental Center at Willowbrook.

Group homes for youths and group homes for the retarded are not, of course, the same thing. But that distinction is seldom noted in the group home debate.

"If anything, the public is better informed about retarded people today," Elisha said. "It's much more difficult to sell a community residence for kids. People are afraid.

"I think the public is turning off," Elisha continued. "There's a tendency to lump many kids in one bunch and label them. Public opinion is not supportive of kids in general. What many people don't realize is that many of these kids are victims, not perpetrators."

Add to this a genuine economic problem — child care agencies seldom run in the black and frequently hunt for more public funding — and the atmosphere for group home programs is far from hopeful.

"I spend a lot of time trying to find where I'm getting my money from for next year," Galindo said.

"There's a conservative tide running through the state and the coun-



Geller House social worker Jo Schneider works with a client.

try," Elisha added. "We're having trouble getting money and support for community-based programs."

Meanwhile, what happens to the kids?

"If kids are pushed out and made outcasts they will gravitate toward illegal and dangerous behavior," Elisha said.

But as long as there are group homes, it seems a certainty there will also be angry neighbors, civic associations and community boards.

"We are providing a community service with your tax money. Don't treat us as intruders," Jackson pleaded. "There's a mentality that says, 'I worked hard to buy a home in this community and I don't want any changes.'"

"Until it happens to you, people just don't want to hear about it."

Last of three parts.



Art teacher Wilfred Murray conducts a ceramics class in Geller House, Arrochar.

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