

# Speakers assail state plan on homes for retarded

By ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

A proposal to revamp the state's method of choosing sites in the community to house the mentally retarded met with complaints that the changes do not go far enough at a citywide public hearing conducted by mental retardation officials last night.

State officials have blamed community resistance to having the retarded as neighbors for the sluggish progress of the state's policy of phasing out large institutions for the retarded like the Staten Island Developmental Center, Willowbrook.

"I think one of the problems the community has had is that we suddenly spring a house on them," a spokeswoman for James E. Introne, the state's mental retardation commissioner, said yesterday. "It would be better if we could all work together."

The spokeswoman, Cora Hoffman, said the proposed site selection method is designed to give communities more time to prepare an appropriate place for the mentally retarded to live among them. In addition, she said, the proposal calls for a closer working relationship between community members and state planners.

"The existing system has not worked and should be changed," agreed Congressman Guy V. Molinari, who was not present but sent a statement read by one of his aides to the hearing at 2 World Trade Center. The freshman congressman said the current site selection method has led to "tragic and senseless displays" of hostility in the commu-

nity.

Introne proposes to announce annually the number of group homes that his agency intends to establish within each community board during the coming fiscal year. Committees to be organized by the community boards would then cooperate with mental retardation officials to search for suitable buildings to house the mentally retarded.

State law requires officials to notify the community that a site has been chosen for a group home 40 days before the home is to begin operation. Until now, it has not been state policy to reveal that a group home is planned more than 40 days ahead of time.

Echoing other opinions heard at the hearing, Molinari suggested that mental retardation officials lack the "administrative ability" to establish group homes wisely.

Helen Wolfson, president of the Board of Visitors of South Beach Psychiatric Center, said she has seen the state lose buildings because it has failed to enter into a "binding contract" with the landlords.

Myra Rose, chairman of Community Board 11 in the Bronx, said that in her neighborhood mental retardation officials had lost a prospective site because another state agency offered a competing and higher bid on the purchase price.

She said the state had proposed numerous sites at public hearings called by her community board, then failed to follow through. "The word is out in our neighborhood that the hearings are window dust, easily overturned," she complained.

Several speakers added that the state has frustrated its own policy by failing to educate the public about the mentally retarded, leaving communities to their unfounded fears.

Mrs. Rose told of an inept attempt to educate when officials instead alienated people in her neighborhood. An official from the state Of-

fice for Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities "compared Willowbrook to the Nazi concentration camps," she said, outraging her predominantly Jewish neighbors, some of whom had been camp inmates.

In addition, Introne proposes that group homes as a general rule will house four or more mentally retarded clients. A federal court judge has ruled that persons who have been cared for in the Staten Island Developmental Center are entitled to be transferred to three-bedroom facilities, and an exception will be made in their case.

Mrs. Hoffman said group homes with three or less beds are being avoided because they are not appropriate for the "medically frail."

"You have to meet institutional codes" for certain severely and profoundly retarded clients, she said. The staffing and equipment requirements for such clients are not "programmatically sound or financially feasible" in very small facilities, she said.

But Murray Schneps, a court-ordered monitor of state care for the retarded, protested yesterday, "This delicate business is a lot of malarkey. The reason that they're delicate is that they live in these great big places."

Schneps, a member of the Willowbrook Review Panel, insisted that the severely and profoundly retarded, as opposed to the less disabled, stand to gain most from small facilities. "The least sophisticated people are the ones who are incapable of dealing with large groups, they're the ones who get lost in a crowd," he said.

"Really, what the bottom line is is money," Schneps said.

A series of six public hearings are being held through next week in various parts of the state to air the proposed policy changes. Public comments are to be used before the changes are put into effect, Mrs. Hoffman said.