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James Stanley stands in front of new building that will house the Borough Developmental Services. The building is owned by the Borough of Wichita. Photo by Jim Mudgett Daily News

Retardates are getting a fairer shake

By MARY ENGELS

WE MAY HAVE been behind for a long while, but now, at long last, we are starting to catch up," said Jim Stanley, director of the Great Kills Borough Developmental Services Office for the mentally retarded.

Stanley was referring to the numerous strides made in recent years "in returning to the community and normalcy those mentally retarded who had been institutionalized for so long, and in some cases unrightly so."

The director said that back in the '70s after serving a stint as social worker at Willowbrook, "I went to study in Pittsburgh. What I saw there was clients living in family situations, working at jobs, on their own."

"Now, seven years later, we are getting to see it here with clients moving in to their own apartments, halfway houses and the like.

"It makes me feel very good to see clients who I've known for years say to me 'Gee, Jim, last night I cooked my own supper.'"

"WE MAY HAVE BEEN late in

providing them with opportunities in the community but as the saying goes, 'Better late than never.'"

It was a federal court judgment in 1975 called the Willowbrook Consent Decree that turned the tide for the mentally retarded. It forced the state to gradually move them from overcrowded, restrictive institutions to a more normal environment in the outside world.

Part of that ongoing movement has been achieved with the opening of three state offices in each of the borough's community board areas.

According to Stanley, each of the Borough Developmental Services Offices, which they are called, provides information to families of the mentally retarded and acquaints the public with staff and programs at the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook.

"The three, located at 100 Park Ave. in Port Richmond; 26 Dumont Ave. in Grammere; and 23 Nelson Ave., Great Kills, are designed to serve the public on a walk-in basis," said Stanley.

"WE HAVE COUNSELORS and staff to deal with the problems of the

mentally retarded people who have never been institutionalized as well as those who have.

"Each director is responsible for his office and beyond that, each office provides different types of services for the clients."

In Stanley's case, "The biggest part of the operation is our technical assistance unit which is comprised of two full time and one part-time workers.

"This unit deals with agencies, both state and voluntary, in trying to insure the best possible clients' care.

"Part of our outreach effort is in helping agencies meet compliance standards when providing inter care facilities.

"MY JOB IS TO TRY and insure the clients are maintained in the community. In addition to giving technical assistance our office is also tied in with the selection of site homes."

This, the director conceded, has been a sticky subject.

"Under the decree order to move clients back into society also comes the need for group homes for them to be set up in the various community board areas," Stanley said. "This has been a

difficult job because people feel threatened and fight it at every turn.

"We have expressed our wish to work with public input at the various community board levels. We still have a long way to go because we will need approximately 12 sites in Board 2 and 3 areas.

"ORIGINALLY THE GOAL was eight sites, but recently the need for more homes has increased."

Stanley said the target date of April 1981 to remove the majority of Willowbrook's population to the outside world has passed, which "makes the pressure to get those sites even greater. It was tough enough looking for eight and now we have to get those 12."

Stanley said that Board 1 provides special alternative living service programs and Board 2's office is responsible for local support services for those living in the area.

Board 2 has a special information and referral service whose function is to assist in securing appropriate services and programs for any developmentally disabled person on Staten Island. It is a free service and the telephone number is (212) 351-7701. ■

212-351-7701