

# Wary neighbors changing minds on group homes

By ANNE FANCIULLO

The issue of siting group homes for the mentally retarded or physically disabled in residential areas has been known to turn normally mild-mannered homeowners into a legion of crusaders bent on preserving the value of their properties.

But does the presence of group homes really influence the resale value of houses surrounding them? The answer, according to several Staten Island real estate appraisers, a state-commissioned group home study and a sampling of borough homeowners

themselves, is decidedly no.

The Island is not unique in the problems faced by social services and state agencies which are turning away from institutional placement of the handicapped in favor of small group facilities in middle class neighborhoods — where they are usually unwelcome.

Although community boards have been given a greater role in determining where these homes may be sited, the situation often places board leaders in the position of trying to balance their responsibilities to disabled New

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Except for a small plaque near the front door, this group home for retarded adults in New Brighton is typical of other neighborhood homes. Homeowners who once protested its opening have come to co-exist happily with it.

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Yorkers and the taxpayers they are supposed to be representing.

"These people (homeowners) don't want anything around them. The first thing they talk about is their property value going down because of the group home coming in," commented Frank Beraud, district manager of Community Board 3. "But there are other issues we should be discussing, like oversaturating one neighborhood with too many group homes, staffing, supervision, parking — but because of this property value question, we never get to any of these points."

Despite the last few years of intense community opposition, lawsuits, and in one case, a suspicious fire in a Dongan Hills house that was scheduled to be occupied by the retarded, some group homes have managed to buck the undercurrent of hostility, and, today, co-exist amicably with their neighbors.

The Advance talked to more than a dozen homeowners throughout the Island who have been residing on the same block — and some, next door — to group homes established within the last five years.

Although some of these facilities are limited to juvenile offenders or troubled youths in foster care programs, they are still group homes subject to the same criticism or praise as residences operated for the retarded or physically disabled.

By and large, the same neighbors who protested the opening of group homes in their communities, who signed their names to petitions and who dipped into their pockets to finance unsuccessful lawsuits, have mellowed in their assignments of the group homes being operated near them.

"They've been very quiet. I don't think anybody could complain," said one Grasmere resident who lives across the street from a home for the retarded at 630 Hylan Blvd. The woman said her daughter, who lives in the same house, was a member of the civic association which fought a two-year legal battle to



**A group of troubled teen-agers lives in this home at 269 Howard Ave., Grymes Hill, which an area resident says could be better maintained.**

S.I. Advance Photo by Barry Schwartz

halt the home's opening. "Just a few months ago, my daughter said she was sorry she ever tried to stop it. There have never been any problems."

Other homeowners made similar comments. Joseph Holzka, an attorney who lives two doors away from a group home at 200 Tysen St., New Brighton, said the facility blends in with the character of the neighborhood and has had no bearing on property values since it opened in 1979.

*For a look at how other Islanders' view group homes; see Just Asking on Page A 13.*

Holzka added, however, "there are still legitimate arguments to be made against saturating a neighborhood with a heavy social burden" and points to a 427-bed adult home in the New Brighton area which has had a far greater effect on the community than a group home providing care for a handful of disabled adults.

On Emerson Hill, where residents charged in a court suit that a group home for the developmentally disabled at 8 Diana Trail would cause "irreparable harm" to the neighborhood, the climate has changed.

Paul DeStefano, a neighboring homeowner, said there have been no problems with the children or the operation. He said, though, that because the home is so heavily staffed — each of the five children has one attendant — employee cars have spilled onto the narrow dead-end street, making it difficult for fire and

sanitation vehicles to maneuver.

"As far as the children go, it's worked out beautifully. They deserve a break and I don't think anyone has any complaints," he said. "But God forbid if there's a fire in that house, there's no way the fire trucks could get in there."

For the most part, homeowners living in the vicinity of group homes for the mentally or physically disabled said they experienced nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, most said the homes were virtually identical to any other on the block occupied by a family.

However, those living near houses leased or owned by agencies providing care to juvenile offenders or youths from broken homes, were more critical. Most complained that the houses were not maintained the way others in the neighborhood are, and recited incidents of rowdiness, theft and vandalism stemming from poor supervision or the more difficult nature of the young people themselves.

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Island real estate appraisers were uniform in their opinion that property owners given an opportunity through the community boards to have a say in group home sitings, would do well to examine the operation of these homes, rather than dwell exclusively on the notion of lowered property values.

"It depends on how the home is being run," said Egon Salmon, a Castleton Corners broker. "The group home does not materially change the price of houses surrounding it, but its presence may reduce the pool of buyers interested in that (neighboring) house. It's more a psychological barrier than a real one. It's the same as your neighbor running a property into the ground — his house needs a painting, the lawn isn't cut. These factors will influence the desirability of your house."

Brent Lally, an appraiser who is also a member of Board 3, agreed that the physical characteristics of a group home are an important factor in determining the value of adjacent properties, and noted that "the supervision aspect of some of these homes leaves something to be desired."

In general, he said an appraisal of a house for sale may take a group home into account if it is known as a problem spot in the neighborhood. Otherwise, it would have no bearing.

In 1978 a study conducted by Dr. Julian Wolpert of Princeton University for the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, 42 communities throughout the state were compared with an equal number where group homes for the retarded had been established. The study found:

☐ Group homes did not generate a higher degree of neighboring property turnover than in areas with no group homes.

☐ Homes adjacent to group facilities showed no value decline.

☐ Selling prices in communities with group homes rose and declined the same as those in the areas without group homes.

☐ The group homes were generally maintained better than surrounding properties, were not conspicuous and group home residents were not visible or noticeable from the streets.

Henry Tancredi, a real estate broker and former Community Board 2 member, is perhaps the most outspoken about the need for community placement of the retarded and disabled.

"There is a need for these homes on Staten Island, and for the most part, the people living in them are from the Island and have every right to live where they want. There are far worse things to be worried about. If they build the Travis power plant or fill the LNG tanks, these people opposing group homes aren't going to be able to sell anything."

*First of a two-part series:*

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