

So far, Tottenville's two civic groups — the Tottenville Improvement Council and the Civic League of United Tottenville — haven't taken an official stand on the issue. But Betty Sutherland, president of the civic league, came as close as you possibly can to rejecting the group home without formally saying so.

"Down in Tottenville here, we have a very bad feeling for the term 'group home,'" said Mrs. Sutherland.

Much of the resentment in Tottenville dates back three weeks to an attempted rape against a 4-year-old girl on Aug. 25. A boy living in a group home on Arthur Kill Road, operated for foster care youths by the Catholic Home Bureau, was accused of the crime.

For some reason, though, Tot-

tenville residents can't or won't acknowledge the difference between a group home for foster care youths and a group home for mentally retarded people.

"We've had such a bad experience with the one on Arthur Kill Road that when people here hear 'group home,' they panic," Mrs. Sutherland said. "We realize the difference, but as long as the connotation is there, there is going to be a problem."

McDonnell said he thought a group home for the mentally retarded might actually be worse than one for homeless youths.

"If they cause trouble here, it'll just be easier for them to get off, right?" he said.

Not everyone, though, is opposed to the group home.

Jan Rose, president of the Tottenville Improvement Council, said she personally tends to favor it, although the council itself has no formal position. "I have seen with my own eyes," she said, "if they are properly run they can and do run favorably."

And Joseph Verderber, a neighbor two blocks from the proposed home, said: "It doesn't bother me. My feeling is everyone has to be somewhere. These people are starting life with enough of a handicap. Let's give them a break."

Still, most of the people at Wednesday night's hearing are likely to be loudly opposed.

On Sundays they will go on blissfully reading their Bibles.

But only the parts they agree with.