

Connelly: Talk up for retarded

By MARY ENGELS

The battle for group homes for the mentally retarded is still facing strong resistance despite the successes of community placement programs, Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connolly said in a speech to a luncheon crowd at A Very Special Place yesterday.

"Everyone of us must act as spokespersons for the retarded," she said. "Myths are made by word of mouth. They can be unmade that way."

Connolly noted that a study done by Princeton University had shown that group homes do not depress property values, a "common misconception," she said.

ONE WAY OF ALLAYING a community's fears, she said, is to establish a community advisory committee that relays problems or complaints and fosters understanding.

"There is a multitude of reasons why the retarded who are capable of living in the community should live in the community," she said. "It is because small home-like settings promote, rather than inhibit growth. They allow the developmentally disabled to be all they can be. Progress is the key word in all of this."

The legislator pointed out that there are now more mentally retarded persons in the state who are living in community settings than are living in state institutions.

That milestone, she said, was achieved last year, seven years after the state was ordered to empty the

overcrowded wards of what was then called Willowbrook State School. There are now 15,000 in group homes and the like compared with 12,000 in the state's 20 developmental centers.

SHE SAID IN 1969 there were three community residences in New York State, but now there are 1,100. She attributed the increase in the number of such homes to programs like A Very Special Place for the mentally retarded, the day treatment center it

operates and to the people who support them.

"Today the philosophy of care for the retarded is one of hope, one that strives to make the most of a disability, of a life," Connolly said.

Honored guest at the luncheon yesterday in the New Dorp facility was City Council President Carol Bellamy, who received "A Very Special Person" award from Very Special Place officials, praising her for efforts on their behalf.