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Group homes continue to feel community pressure

By JULIE MACK
Advance Staff Writer

Staten Island residents continue to be uneasy about the concept of group homes, officials say, even as the number of group homes on the Island has increased.

"The term 'group home' scares the hell out of people," according to John Powers, chairman of Community Board 3. "There is an attitude of 'Why does it have to be my neighbor? Why next door to me?'"

The concept of community residences for the mentally retarded, the mentally ill, the emotionally disturbed, the homeless or for troubled youths is one that is growing in popularity, at least among state officials and social services professionals.

That is particularly true in the case of the mentally retarded. Gov. Mario M. Cuomo said recently that he plans to completely close Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook within three years, which means finding space in the community for 1,000 patients. About 100 of those patients are Island natives who will probably be placed in group homes on Staten Island.

To fill the demand for community beds, officials at the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) hope to open 1,400 new beds statewide this year and another 1,400 beds next year.

There is also a growing de-

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dences for the mentally ill and emotionally disturbed.

Ira Kleinman, spokesman for South Beach Psychiatric Center, said the center has patients who are ready to leave the hospital, but are not ready to live independently. They need programs that will give them access to the community while providing therapeutic support.

"I think I'm safe in saying that there is clearly not enough community beds for the people who need them," Kleinman said. "And it's not just quantitative, but also a qualitative issue in terms of the shortage of programs developed for populations with specific needs. If there is going to be a theme for this year, it is going to be expansion of community residential options."

The establishment of group homes in the past on Staten Island has had mixed results. "A lot depends on the particular group home — how it is run, how it came into existence," according to Thomas LaManna, chairman of Community Board 1.

"There are a number of specific things that group homes have done to minimize negative reaction — like involving the community by holding open houses, inviting them to meet the staff, talk about the residents. Some homes even go so far as to allow the community to use certain facilities.

"Most of the group homes have been accepted here on the North Shore, but there are instances where there have been problems," he said. "It is also fair to say that the problems tend to be more with the group homes for delinquent children — those residents are more visible and there is more of a management problem."

But in most cases — especially those involving the mentally retarded — the community's fears are worse than the realities.

"I think a lot of people have fears which are not founded," Powers said. "We've had few, if any complaints against the homes already operating in our community. A lot of times, the residents in the area don't even know that the group home is there."

But even though the majority of group homes have worked out

well, officials still have a responsibility to recognize the problems and fears when placing a new residence, LaManna said.

"The placement of group homes is not a one-way street. I think people have legitimate concerns," LaManna said. "It doesn't make someone a bigot or ignorant when they ask questions about what kind of impact a group home is going to have. They deserve answers to those questions."

He added that, at least in his opinion, Staten Island's North Shore has been receptive to the establishment of group homes. He noted that Community Board 1 has one of the highest concentration of group homes in the city.

"Staten Island has a long history of opening its door to people of all kinds," LaManna said. "I think that's an asset. But in turn, what we expect is programs that function well."

Both LaManna and Powers said they thought Islanders have become more open to the concept of group homes as the number of group homes has increased, although that acceptance is not wholehearted yet.

But, as both Community Board chairmen note the need for group homes and support the concept, they ask government officials to look to other areas when establishing new homes.

"We have our share," said

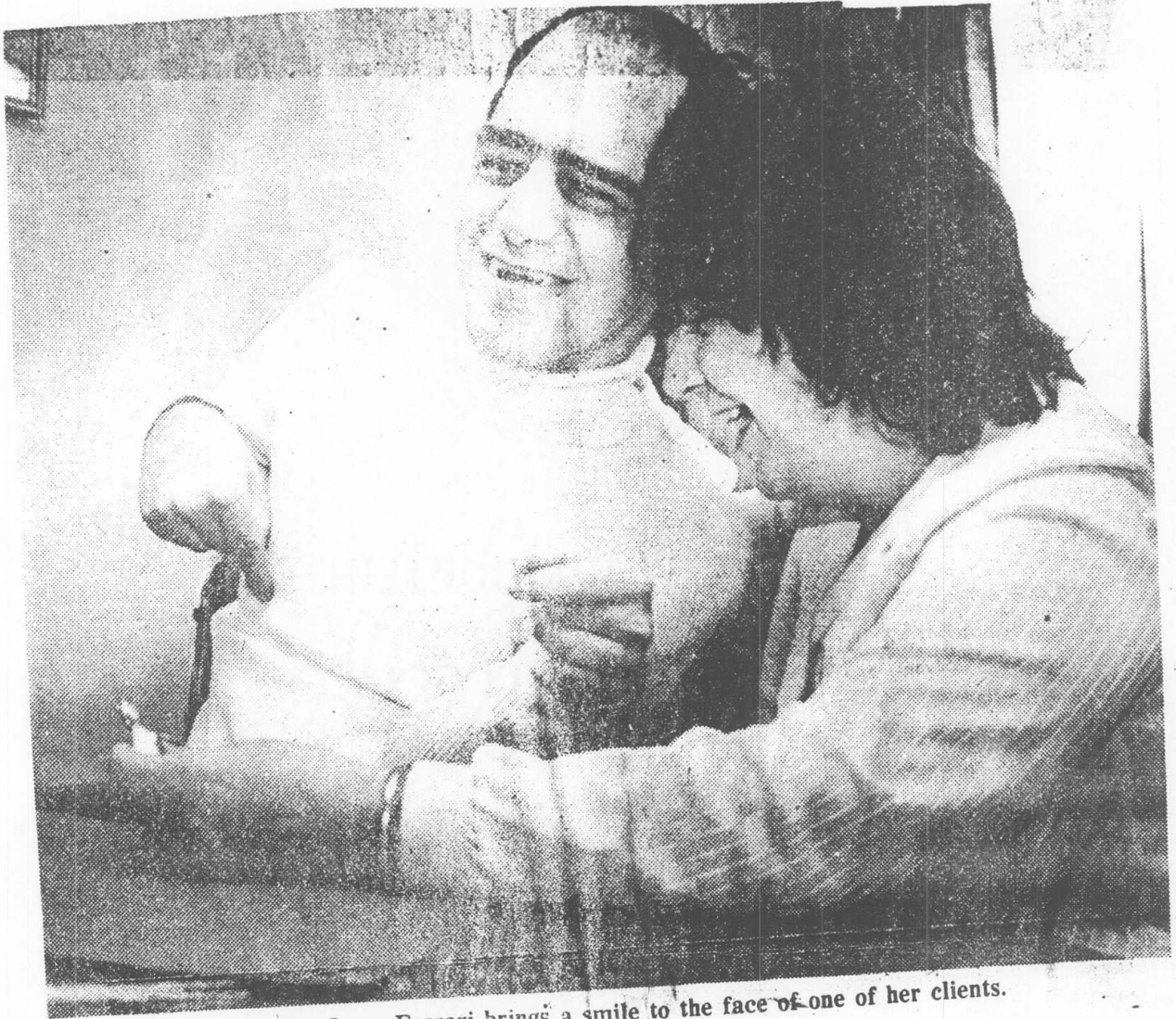
Powers. "All we are asking is for the state to look at other areas of the Island."

"Generally speaking, we are in favor of deinstitutionalization," LaManna said. "But it's fair to say that if we put a large number of group homes in one neighborhood, it does have an impact. I'm not insinuating that the people in group homes are bad people, but you are talking about people in need of specific services."

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Two residents of a group home in Oakwood share a tender moment. S.I. Advance Photos by Steve Zaffarar



Counselor Irene Ferrari brings a smile to the face of one of her clients.

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