

# Schools for retarded clash over building

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A \$350,000 renovation of a Totenville building owned by Volunteers of America (VOA) will begin next month, with hopes that the agency can open a new preschool for mentally retarded children in September.

But the renovation project and the plans for the new school, which is to serve about 40 infants and preschoolers, are viewed with an angry eye by Terri Russo, head of the Down's Syndrome Learning Center, the program that is being displaced by the VOA.

At the center of the dispute is the building at 10 Joline Ave., Totenville. The Down's Syndrome Center has occupied the structure since 1972 under a rent-free arrangement with the VOA. The center currently serves about 13 mentally retarded infants and preschoolers in a year-around program.

But last October, the Down's Syndrome Center was given notice that the VOA wanted to establish its own program in the building, and that Mrs. Russo's program would have to relocate within six to nine months. Mrs. Russo was recently notified that her program must vacate the building by March 15.

Richard Salyer, executive director of the New York branch of the VOA, said his agency hoped to allow the Down's Syndrome Center to remain in the building through the school year. But that will not be possible because the construction project — which includes renovation of the existing classroom building and the addition of a new 3,000-square-foot wing — must get under way soon if the new school is to open as scheduled on Sept. 4.

To help make amends, Salyer said his agency will help the Down's Syndrome Center with its relocation — by providing manpower and equipment for the actual move, by offering storage space, and by giving the Down's Syndrome Center up to \$1,000 monthly to subsidize the cost of renting another facility until September.

"We are willing to do all this because we don't want to put their kids out on the street," Salyer said. "Nobody knows better than us the importance of continuity in a program.

"We know that the moving is painful, but we are trying to make it as painless as possible."

While Mrs. Russo plans to accept the offers of help, she is still bitter at what she regards as the VOA's insensitivity.

"It (the move) really is destroying the continuity of our program," she said. "I think the VOA is very cold and calculated."

She also charges that the need for another preschool program for the developmentally disabled on Staten Island has not been demonstrated — a point contested by Salyer — and that the VOA is "undermining" her program by recruiting staff and students from the Down's Syndrome Center.

Salyer is giving students at the Down's Syndrome school enrollment priority in the VOA's new program, which he has said should help alleviate "hard feelings."

Salyer has also said that he is not trying to force the Down's Syndrome Center to shut down. However, the VOA decided to form its own program when it concluded that the Down's syndrome school was not properly funded and that the building was underutilized, according to Salyer.

Salyer stressed that his program will not be limited to Down's syndrome children and that the program design will be "very professional. It will be a good, well-rounded program." It will include special education, physical therapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy and social services, he added.

The program will be open to children 4 years old and younger who are certified for admission by the state Education Department.

Mrs. Russo says the future of her program is still uncertain. She has two possible sites which she can use to relocate her center, but neither will be available until fall. She said she is still having difficulties finding an appropriate temporary site for the interim.

Her problems are further compounded by a recent illness — Mrs. Russo was admitted to Richmond Memorial Hospital last week after suffering a slight stroke, which doctors say was caused by emotional tension. Although she hopes to leave the hospital by the weekend, she said that her doctors have told her to "slow down and relax. But they don't realize what is happening in my life."

Mrs. Russo said she cannot bear the idea of abandoning her school. "I've been doing this for 15 years," she said. "We have the expertise. We were the pioneers. To stop doing it now just because these other people have come in — I can't do it. I just can't do it."