

The problem with growing up

By JULIE MACK
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For people like Sonia Braniff, a daughter's 21st birthday inspires fear rather than celebration.

Mrs. Braniff's daughter, Lynne, who has cerebral palsy, is a 17-year-old student at Susan Wagner High School. But when her 21st birthday arrives in four years, and she is forced to leave Susan Wagner, Lynne may have no place else to go.

There are few adult programs in the city which suit Lynne, Mrs. Braniff said. Lynne's abilities are such that she resists the idea of a sheltered workshop for the retarded. "She says she is not going to go to a 'dumb workshop,'" her mother said.

There is a program in Manhattan, Job Path, which might be appropriate. "But I may have to give up my own employment in order to transport her, which I would do," said Mrs. Braniff, who is coordinator for the Board of Education's Project ROPO (Reach Out to Parents Office), which serves families of the handicapped.

The term 'gap in services' cannot adequately describe the nightmare that some families face when they discover their children can no longer participate in one program and have no alternative to take its place.

But Job Path may not have the space for Lynne. "The programs like that are few and far between and they can only serve so many," Mrs. Braniff said.

When Lynne turns 21, she will face a problem shared by more than 1,000 people every year in New York State. The problem even has a name: Aging out.

That refers to the gap in services which exists for many disabled people when they reach their 21st birthday. But the term "gap in services" cannot adequately describe the nightmare that some families face when they discover their children can no longer participate in one program and have no alternative to take its place.

The situation occurs because different agencies work with handicapped youngsters and handicapped adults, and the programs are rarely coordinated.

State and local education departments have programs for handicapped youngsters. But when a client reaches 21, he or she is referred to the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), the Office of Mental Health or the state Education Department's Office of Vocational Rehabilitation.

But the young adults must compete with other older adults for a limited number of program openings.

Also, social service professionals say, the programs for people under age 21 are more specialized and tailored to the clients.

For example, the Mission of the Immaculate Virgin at Mount Loretto, Pleasant Plains, runs two residential programs for adolescents who are "dual diagnostic" — both mentally retarded and mentally ill. Some of the youngsters in the Mount Loretto programs are also physically handicapped.

In contrast, most of the programs available to adults are either for people who are retarded or mentally ill. When he turns 21, the Mount Loretto client must be "assigned" to either the state Office of Mental Health or the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. There is no halfway ground.

"It's almost like we have to

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