

# Battle heats up at state hearing on group homes

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The fight over planned group homes on the grounds of Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC) moved to a new battleground yesterday as about 175 people voiced opposition to a statewide group-home plan that includes the SIDC site.

Crowding a hearing room in a state office building in Manhattan, opponents and a small group of supporters testified for more than seven hours in a special hearing on the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) plan to build small residential units (SRUs) on existing institution sites statewide.

The OMRDD plan calls for construction of small, 12-bed units on five institution sites to provide "community-like" settings for people now in institutions. Statewide 96 people are housed in SRUs, and 10 times that amount are projected to live in them by 1991 as part of a plan to eventually transfer 3,000 institutionalized clients to the community, according to OMRDD.

Opponents of the plan call it another form of segregation and a retrenchment of the movement to de-institutionalize mentally retarded and developmentally disabled people. Supporters see it as a halfway house between institutionalization and community integration.

"There's just no possibility that we would accept them (SRUs) as community placements. We haven't worked on the Willowbrook case for 14 years merely to move them (clients) from one part of the campus to another," said

Michael Lottman, the attorney who represented Willowbrook clients in their successful battle to close the scandal-ridden institution.

The group-home plans were discovered "accidentally" in an OMRDD memorandum by Assemblyman Steven Sanders of Queens. Sanders, chairman of the committee on Oversight, Analysis and Investigation, led the meeting with West Brighton Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, chairman of the committee on Mental Health, Mental Retardation, Developmental Disabilities, Alcoholism and Substance Abuse.

Louis Ganim, a spokesman for OMRDD Commissioner Arthur Webb, said the SRU plan was not to be made public. Corson's Brook Woods — the group home site on SIDC that is to house 144 clients — and another site in Newark, N.Y. served as a model for the plan.

Until yesterday's hearing, opposition to the site has centered on the environmental concerns about the wetlands character of the site. However, the OMRDD has been given permission to start construction, and says it plans to soon issue an environmental impact statement.

Webb, in 1½ hours of testimony before the Assembly panel, hailed the plan as part of a "revolution" to free the retarded and developmentally disabled people from troubled institutions.

But opponents assailed the group homes as "an isolated, segregated camp," and "an old, discredited idea" that will keep clients from ever leaving institution grounds.

Kathleen McCaig, downstate

coordinator for the newly formed New York State Committee for Community Living, blasted Webb's description of the sites and called the plan "a financial albatross."

"We're getting 'sort of community-like' instead of 'right in the neighborhood,'" the St. George resident said.

Other opponents, among them four former Willowbrook residents, said that anything short of fully integrated community homes is a "stopgap" and "just another institution."

The testimony of the former residents hushed the restless crowd and brought tears to some as the four read prepared texts in nearly incomprehensible, halting speech.

Bernard Carabello, who spent 18 years in Willowbrook, called the former conditions at Willowbrook "dehumanizing."

"Institutions are horrible. They dehumanize human beings," he said, struggling to gain control of himself.

"I'm afraid we're beginning to step back into the dark ages. The issue is not SRUs, the issue is integration. I don't care how much we sit and debate how good institutions are. There is no way you can convince me. Animals in zoos got better treatment than human beings in institutions," he said.

Carabello's remarks came after Assemblywoman Connelly told the crowd "not all institutions are bad." She also said that the quality of care at SIDC had greatly improved in the aftermath of a scandal at the facility in the mid-1970s that led to a 1975 court decision ordering that it be phased out.

According to Ganim, the Corson's Brook site is "the bottom line" of the master plan devised to phase out SIDC by 1987.

Although the Corson's Brook Woods plan was designed and partially funded before the statewide SRU plan was begun last year, he said, further funds are included in a capital budget request now before the state legislature and thus could be withheld.

OMRDD is faced with spending millions to upgrade current large institutions, including SIDC, to continue to meet federal regulations and receive federal Medicaid funds on which it vitally depends, Webb said.

But in order "not to throw good money after bad," Webb said, OMRDD wants to divert capital funding for such upgrading into the SRUs. Opponents want the money to go directly into community homes.

During the hearing, Genevieve Benoit of the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council voiced the group's support of the homes, provided that they lead to placement in community units. The New Dorp resident, also representing A Very Special Place, blasted opposition on environmental grounds as misleading.

"Our feeling on Staten Island is that the requirements for an environmental impact statement is another expression of opposition to group homes in their (opponents) back yard," she said.