

Staten Island From cage to community

Care of retarded is revolutionized

By JACK LEAHY

Daily News Staff Writer

"I was shocked and saddened by what I saw there (at Willowbrook). There are young children slipping into blindness and life-long dependence. There are crippled children without adequate medical attention or rehabilitative therapy. And there are many—far too many—living in filth and dirt, their clothing in rags, in rooms less comfortable and cheerful than the cages in a zoo."

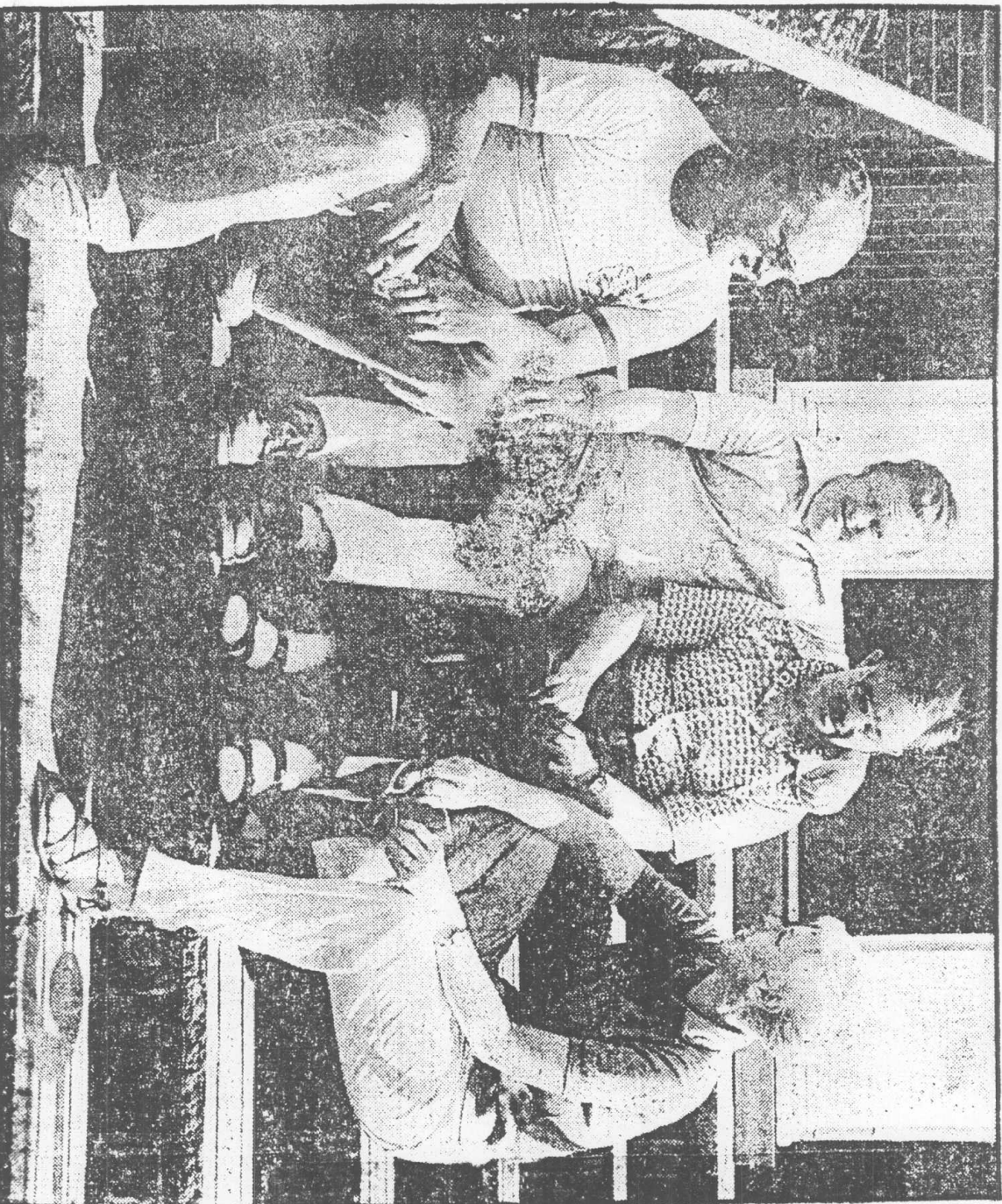
—Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, 1965

More than two decades ago, most people of good will shared Robert Kennedy's shock over the zoo-like conditions that existed at the state's Willowbrook Center for the Retarded on Staten Island.

Revelation about the warehousing of human beings in large institutions such as Willowbrook led to a movement to establish group homes or hostels that would house a dozen or so retarded children and adults in community settings.

The movement gained accelerated impetus in 1975 when then Gov. Hugh Carey signed the Willowbrook consent decree, designed to implement a court-mandated state commitment to take 5,000 retarded people out of institutions for placement in community-based group homes.

From the outset, however, the group homes ran into vehement, sometimes violent opposition from some residents of areas where the homes were to be located. Representatives of agencies sponsoring the



IN VALLEY STREAM, LI., neighbor Gary Shaw (l. to r.) chats with group-home residents (l. to r.) John Scally and Henry Dennis and residence's director, Sister Catherine O'Shea.