

# Staten Island From cage to community

## Care of retarded is revolutionized

By JACK LEAHY

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*"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."*

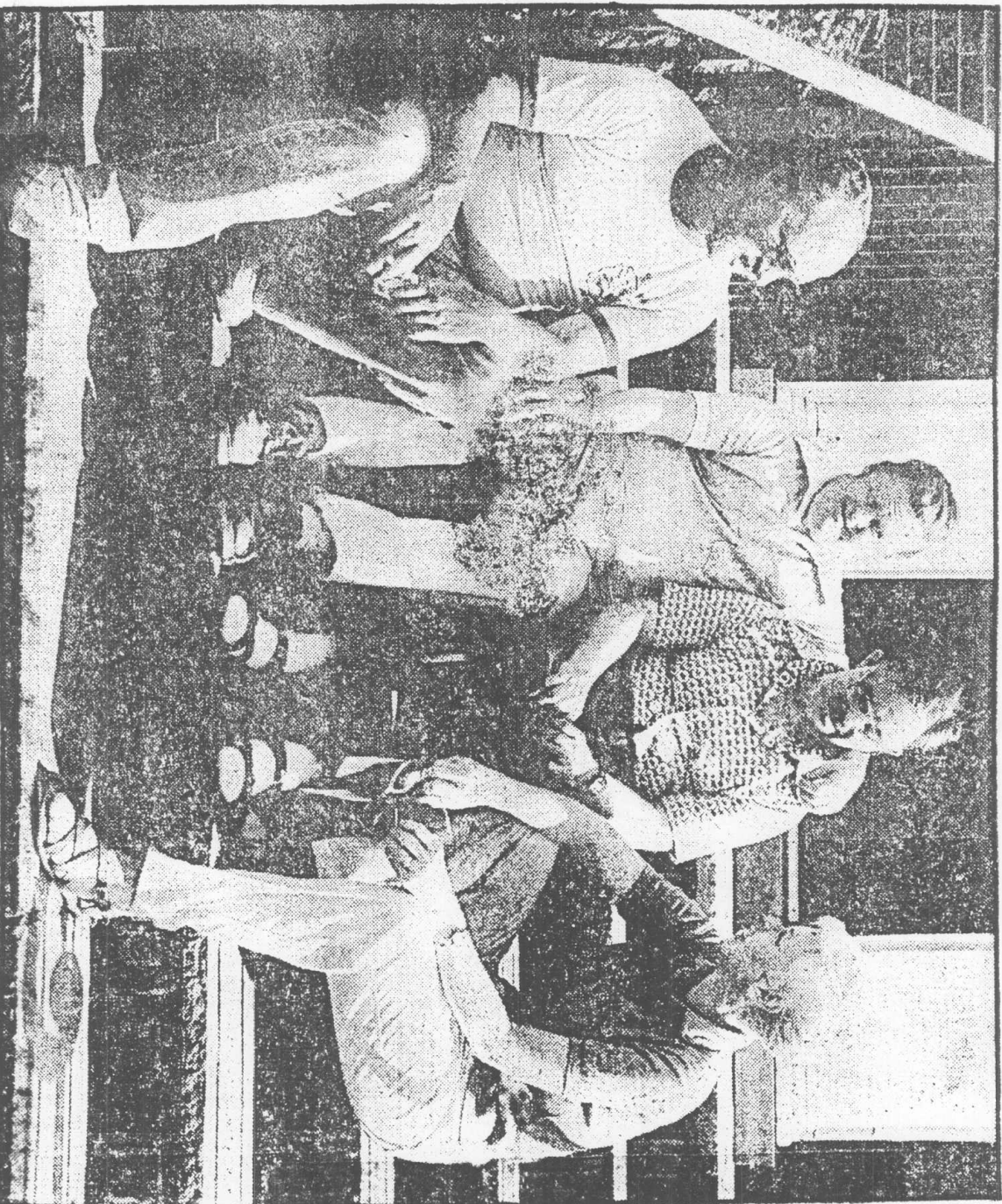
—Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, 1965

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.

hostels were vained at hearings. Fathers and mothers of retardates often were reduced to tears by the name-calling. After the homes were set up, the houses received frequent threats of arson. Occasionally, they were vandalized. Court cases abounded as die-hard foes fought futilely to bar the homes legally or oust them from their neighborhoods.

Today, while much of that individual and organized resistance still exists for new hostels, most of the established homes have become accepted in their neighborhoods, according to Arthur Webb, the commissioner of the New York State Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.

#### 'Heavy-duty opposition'

"Ironically, neighbors who once put up the greatest resistance tend to grow to become our greatest advocates," said Webb.

"Unfortunately, there is always going to be opposition, including heavy-duty opposition with court suits, political pressure and all the rest," he continued. "But the best public-relations tool we have in a community is an existing residence. When people see how well it works out, they tend to come around."

Webb might have been speaking about Gary Shaw, 37, of Valley Stream, L.I. In 1973, Catholic Char-

ities of the Rockville Centre Diocese of Nassau and Suffolk proposed setting up a hostel in a former convent on McKeon Ave., at the opposite end of the block from where Shaw lived. Shaw helped pay for newspaper advertisements objecting to the proposal, joined in picketing demonstrations, and led a petition drive in which more than 2,000 signatures from people living within a five-block radius of the convent were collected.

"I said that if they converted the convent into a hostel, I'd buy guard dogs and string barbed wire to protect my nephews and nieces from being molested by the retarded," recalled Shaw, a supervisor for the Town of Hempstead's animal shelter in Wantagh, L.I.

#### 'Fear of the unknown'

"We were all worried about our property values falling, but I think fear of the unknown was the real reason why everybody was so openly hostile," he said.

To alleviate that fear, Sister Catherine O'Shea, a nun who helped found and still directs the Valley Stream residence, took Shaw and other leaders of the opposition to visit an existing hostel operated by the Guild for Exceptional Children on 67th St. in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn.

"We finally worked out an agree-

ment," Shaw said. "We would give Sister Catherine a year; and if the group home didn't work out, she promised to pack up and leave.

"A year later, when we got to know that the retarded were not monsters or dangerous, we accepted them as neighbors just like everybody else on the block."

Seven men and five women moved into the convent, and Shaw sold his home on McKeon Ave. "for twice what I paid for it."

But he wasn't moving out of the neighborhood. Instead, he bought a larger house even closer to the hostel where he still lives with his wife, Elizabeth, and their children, Garrett, 3, and Sara, 6 months.

#### Change in attitude

"Whenever I'm asked," Shaw said, "I go as a volunteer to public hearings to tell people of our experience in Valley Stream and to speak in behalf of group homes. The retarded make good neighbors."

This kind of transformation in community attitudes has been common wherever hostels have been set up, according to government officials and representatives of the private agencies that operate most of the homes with state and federal funds.

One result of the ever-growing hostel movement is that there are only 231 people living at Willowbrook, where 6,200 were once crammed behind its forbidding brick walls. The institution is now known as the Staten Island Developmental Center. Next year, the state plans to phase it out completely and turn the site over to the College of Staten Island of the City University of New York.

"The state and private voluntary agencies opened 3,000 new community residential beds over the last three years, including 1,400 last year alone," Webb said. "We intend to open another 1,400 this year and the same number next year. By 1991, we hope to have 7,000 to 8,000 new beds."

#### 75% live at home

Even if that goal can be attained, however, it is debatable whether it will meet the actual needs.

Webb said that 75% of the nearly 200,000 children and adults with varying degrees of developmental disabilities in New York State are still living with their families, some so severely retarded that they eventual-



**WAITING FOR PLACEMENT:** Leon and Cecile Goldfeier and daughter, Fay, in their Bayside, Queens, home.

JOHN PEDIN/DAILY NEWS

continued. "Which means their parents are in their 70s. And frequently, the best advice we can give those parents is to stay healthy so they can continue to care for their children."

Cecile Goldfeier, 62, of Bayside, Queens, said that she and her husband, Leon, 66, have had their 31-year-old daughter, Fay, on waiting lists of various organizations for more than 10 years. Mrs. Goldfeier recently formed a group called Parent Advocates for Developmentally Impaired Adults to focus attention on the problem.

"This is an issue that seems very unimportant unless you have someone like Fay in your own family," she said. "Fay has cerebral palsy, but she is a sweet, adorable young woman who has lived in Bayside for more than 20 years. All of our neighbors adore her, and wherever she lived, people would like her after they got to know her."

Thomas Dern, the director of Residential Services for the Young Adult Institute, a non-profit agency that operates 25 hostels in Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan, the Bronx, and Westchester, said that some of the 800 parents on his waiting list have been there for more than a decade.

It's difficult to find group homes for the children of these parents, Dern said, not only because of continuing community opposition, but also because of the skyrocketing cost of large one-family houses and the falling mortgage interest rates for private buyers of such houses.

"In Manhattan, forget about new community residences," Dern said. "Brownstones are going there for a million dollars and more. We can't touch that."

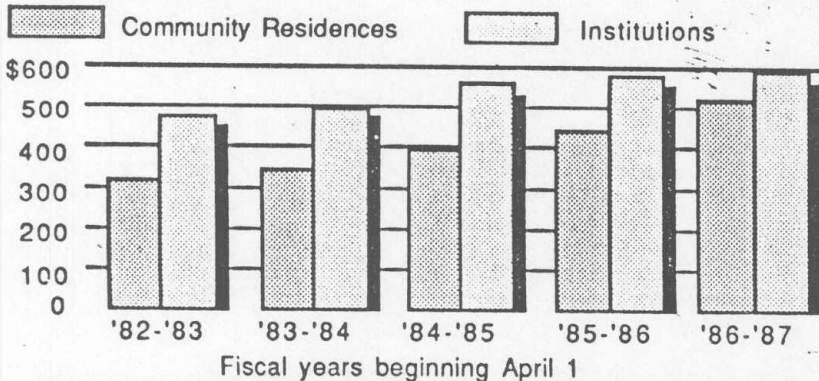
"In other areas, more people can now afford the larger houses we need, and they compete with us in the real estate market," he added.

And in Nassau County, where the local chapter of the Association for the Help of Retarded Children is opening its 21st group home this month on Peninsula Blvd. in Woodmere, houses suitable for hostels are scarce, according to Murray Fried, the director of Residential Services.

Since 1978, when the Padavan Law was enacted to mandate restrictive procedures for setting up hostels, time-consuming hearings and bureaucratic hurdles have sometimes delayed the sales of houses to be used as hostels so long that property owners often give up and make a quick sale to a private buyer, Dern said.

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KARL GUDE/DAILY NEWS

ly will require institutionalization.

Others are functioning at a sufficiently high level to be able to live independently. But the vast majority in between will require thousands of beds in community residences or supervised apartments.

Michael Goldfarb, the executive director of the New York City Chapter of the Association for the Help of Retarded Children, said that his pri-

private agency alone has 900 people on waiting lists for community residences.

"That's six times the number of people we have in our 13 existing residences," Goldfarb said. "And in the future, we believe we'll only be able to open three new homes every other year."

"The average age of those on our waiting list is 47 to 48 years old," he