

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-