

Disabled seniors to gain new program in March

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The city's first program for developmentally disabled senior citizens will open in March on Staten Island, it was announced yesterday at a meeting between government officials and mental retardation professionals.

The program will be run by the New Dorp-based A Very Special Place, and will care for about 50 people ages 55 and up, said Sandra Williams, assistant commissioner for the city Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Alcoholism Services Department, at the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council's annual legislative lunch.

"We'll try to maintain (clients at) the level they're at, and also help them to enjoy themselves," said Diane M. Buglioli, A Very Special Place's director. According to city estimates, there are about 250 people living on Staten Island who are in need of such a program.

But regarding services to those at the other end of the age spectrum, those attending the lunch complained to legislators that Staten Island is inadequately served by the Brooklyn-based Early Childhood Direction Center. The center, which the two boroughs share, refers parents of developmentally disabled infants and children to appropriate agencies.

It is available on a walk-in basis for Staten Islanders for only four hours once every two weeks, in a temporary office at St. Vincent's Medical Center. The Staten Island hours were reduced last spring as a result of federal funding cuts.

Early childhood direction centers were established in 1980 and are funded by the state Education Department. Along with providing referrals, the centers are sup-

posed to make contact with parents who may be in need of their services.

According to council members, little outreach is done on Staten Island, and few of the Islanders the center serves are referred to local agencies.

"People are told to go to Brooklyn," said Terry Russo, director of the Down's Syndrome Foundation. "There are agencies on this island who can meet the needs, but have not received the referrals."

Another issue on the agenda was a plan proposed by the state that would change the funding formula for treatment of the mentally retarded and open the field to profit-making agencies and competitive bidding.

"We see this as a move away from the interest of the consumer and the client, and into greater

cost-containment and centralization," said Dr. Gerald Spielman, director of the Pouch Center.

Dr. Spielman also favors legislation that would force the state to consider local priorities when it sets the budget for care of the mentally retarded and developmentally disabled.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly said she would sponsor such legislation this session.

The government officials attending the session included Mrs. Connelly; Assemblyman Robert A. Stranieri; Mrs. Williams; James Walsh, director of the Staten Island Borough Developmental Service Office; Borough President Ralph Lamberti's representative, Thomas LaManna, and Charles Browning, of the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.