

By MARY ENGELS

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SOME 10,500 Staten Islanders—3% of the population—are developmentally disabled, yet the vast majority of them are not being helped, according to an expert in the field.

Diane Buglioli, chairman of the Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council and director of A Very Special Place, said, "We are now identifying more and more developmentally disabled people, even many who are coming here from other boroughs. But the sad fact is they are not aware of the many programs being offered here."

"They are still keeping their children at home, and that is the population we are trying to reach."

Buglioli said that the council recently initiated a Free Information Exchange System to benefit those seeking help.

People seeking such assistance in locating appropriate services and programs for a developmentally disabled person should call the exchange at 351-7701.

Services are listed

The staff will be able to advise callers on where to go for help in everything from counseling to day treatment services, from educational services to homemakers' services, from occupational therapy to physical therapy.

"It is just one of many services our council has become involved in since its inception in 1974," Buglioli said.

The Staten Island Regional Retardation and Disabilities Council is a consortium of service providers, consultants, and interested citizens concerned with the health and welfare of

developmentally disabled Staten Island residents and their families.

"We have no real political power, but we do have clout," said Buglioli.

And it is through that clout that the council has managed to preserve more than 100 acres of land at the former Willowbrook site, to be known as the Richmond Complex.

"We fought for land-banking of the space and we requested that the state be aware of the future of the developmentally disabled," Buglioli said.

"As the numbers grow, there would be no corresponding growth of programs and a place for them to be treated, such as the complex," she added.

Buglioli noted that it was due to the efforts of State Sen. John Marchi (R-C-Staten Island) and Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly (D-Staten Island) that the battle was won.

"We now intend to have input on what goes on there, and we have started an ad hoc planning committee to begin working on the plans for the complex," she said.

Proud of Tele-Ride

A resource center and, someday, treatment programs and a therapeutic pool are among the programs mentioned for the complex.

"We also expect our Tele-Ride program, which provides transportation for the developmentally disabled, to be based there," Buglioli said.

She added, "The council is very proud of Tele-Ride, and we are unique in that the other boroughs have it only for a limited time and we have it on an ongoing basis to provide transportation for clients to get to and from their workshops to their homes."

"The council fought for that program for a long time and kept pressing home the point that Staten Island was not like the other boroughs, in

the sense that to get from one area to another required more changes of transportation, which is difficult for our clients."

Buglioli noted that because of the size of the borough, "We are fortunate in that we offer a pretty complete continuum of services, from pre-school programs to special-education schools to workshops to recreational centers."

"The one thing we were lacking, and are about to rectify, is a senior activities and care center," she said.

The state's first program for developmentally disabled seniors is scheduled to open in March in Dongan Hills. It will be run by the New Dorp-based A Very Special Place.

The project will care for about 50 people, ages 55 and up.

'Finely tuned' experience

Buglioli explained that the participants will be offered a meaningful and normalized alternative to continued participation in day treatment programs, sheltered workshops or competitive employment.

Daily programming at the center will range from group socialization activities to specific health-maintenance training sessions, she said.

"It is expected that the utilization of this program model will offer clients a diversified, enriched experience that is finely tuned to the senior stage of their lives," Buglioli said.

The council will soon begin lobbying for other issues of mutual concern regarding the Island's developmentally disabled.

This year, for the first time, the council will be lobbying in the local offices of state and city legislators.

"We used to trip up to Albany or down to City Hall to plead the cause for the developmentally disabled, but it was too difficult for our consumers

to do this," Buglioli said. "Since we know them all anyway, we thought we could just as easily get our message across at the local offices, and we plan to do that before the end of the month."

One of the goals of the council will be to reestablish the Staten Island Early Childhood Direction Center on the Island.

"Since 1981, the center has been only a part-time service, operating half a day a week from St. Vincent's Hospital," said Buglioli.

'Clearly demonstrated' need

"The need for a full-time center has been clearly demonstrated by survey findings, which established a clear shortfall in the number of children referred by the present part-time center."

"We found that of the 300 children then attending the six programs on the Island, only 14% of them were referred by the Early Childhood Direction Center," she concluded.

Buglioli said that since there is no central referral source, agencies must perform all "child find" activities on their own. This, she asserted, causes an unnecessary hardship on programs in the borough and results in a lack of data regarding the population.

"We feel that a disservice is being done to developmentally disabled children, their families and the service providers on Staten Island," she said.

"With the reestablishment of a full-time Early Childhood Direction Center," she continued, "there would be a more prompt and centrally coordinated effort to provide services to all eligible families and children."

"We are now hoping to get this through our legislators," she declared.