

Workshop's relocation irks mental health advocates

By ALICE McQUILLAN
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Mental health advocates once described a new center for the retarded on the grounds of the former Willowbrook state institution as a bright star rising from the darkness.

Now they worry the uncompleted Elizabeth A. Connelly Community Resource Center will become a fallen star. The center's first tenant is a workshop for the retarded that is leaving an urban setting — and those same advocates charge this relocation betrays a hard-won policy of letting the retarded live and work in the midst of the community.

"I see that emotionally and pro-

fessionally as a step backward," said Dr. Gerald Spielman, a member of the Staten Island Retardation and Disabilities Council, an advocacy group. His remark drew applause at the council's annual luncheon Friday.

These concerns "disappoint" the assemblywoman for whom the center is named, the legislator who has championed the rights of the retarded for the past 13 years. Mrs. Connelly and the site's state administrator said that after years of reform, advocates should see the old grounds as part of the community instead of the isolated place where the retarded were hidden and mistreated.

"It isn't Willowbrook anymore,"

she said. "There are no bars, there are no walls. It is an open facility."

Both sides tout the center as an opportunity to showcase enlightened care for the retarded. Differences lie in how to achieve that vision.

The advocates want the complex of nine buildings left from the old institution to host programs not now available to the retarded and their families. They would like a therapeutic pool, gymnasium, information exchange, speciality music, dance, and art classes and support services.

Mrs. Connelly said she agrees, (See WORKSHOP, Page A 14)

but that a set plan with these goals would never survive the vagaries of yearly budget negotiations. Advocates suspect the center will draw existing programs hit with rising commercial rents, like the vocational workshop that moved there in October.

The Association for Children with Retarded Mental Development (ACRMD) said it moved because its yearly rent on Hylan Boulevard in Great Kills was doubled to \$140,000 and they could not find affordable space elsewhere.

Advocates for the retarded charge the state is actively encouraging programs they fund to relocate to the Connelly center. A

1985 consultant's study for the site suggests programs look to the Connelly center "as a space resource, rather than to more expensive rental space scattered throughout the community."

"Many of the parents are saying, 'they closed one Willowbrook and they're starting another one,'" said Polly Panzella,

mother of a retarded son and member of the court-ordered Board of Visitors that oversaw the 12-year phase-out of the institution completed this September. "That's a real fear we have."

The new director of the state-owned site, Robert Witkowsky, and Mrs. Connelly refute these claims as being against state policy. Since isolating the retarded led to the herding of 6,000 people inside Willowbrook, the state has subsequently adopted community-based care as its mandate.

However while denying any change in this policy, both Mrs. Connelly and Witkowsky said the old grounds are in effect part of the community. The assemblywoman said she is lobbying for city bus service through the site.

The state retained about 175 acres of land for the mentally retarded, according to Witkowsky, director of the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office. It holds the Connelly center, a research institute,

small group homes for about 130 retarded people and administrative buildings.

The remaining 205 acres of the 380-acre wooded site will become the new campus of the College of Staten Island.

"When we have the transportation in, that will mitigate the argument that we're regressing," said Mrs. Connelly. "This isn't Willowbrook anymore. We have to let go."

Art Roza, ACRMD associate executive director, said, "If I thought of it as an institution, I wouldn't be back there." He said 80 retarded people assemble and package envelopes, cards, posters and other products in the workshop. Every day we can, Roza said, the program buses them to a nearby shopping district on their lunch hour so they can have more contact with the outside community.

Besides ACRMD, which has a five-year lease, and the 38-by-82-foot pool, the center will also host

a day program for about 80 retarded people now on property slated for the College of Staten Island, Witkowsky said.

He also confirmed that a plot of land near Forest Hill Road will go to Young Israel of Staten Island for parking and recreation. Witkowsky, who only started his job last month, said he did not know the size of this plot or terms of the transfer.

Mrs. Connelly said this agreement was in the works since at least 1978 because there were no plans for the land and the synagogue has been a good neighbor. Rabbi Jay Marcus of Young Israel could not be reached for comment.

As for the center's future uses, Witkowsky said "there is no firm plan in place." Mrs. Connelly said she prefers this flexibility.

However Diane Buglioli, head of the Staten Island Retardation and Disabilities Council, and other advocates want a commitment that the center "fill the gap" in mental health services and not relocate existing community programs.

However it remains unclear just what shape the center will finally take.

"I don't know what I see down the road," said Mrs. Connelly.