

Lifestyle.

Respite house gives parents a breather

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For many working couples today, arranging for child care that is safe, reliable and convenient is the first order of business. In a family where two incomes are needed, finding a care giver has become a necessity, not a luxury.

Even most mothers and fathers who work inside the home want some time off from the daily rigors of child rearing.

Sometimes all a parent needs is a break from parenting.

And for a couple with a mentally retarded or developmentally disabled child, that need is often greater.

The Staten Island branch of the Association for the Help of Retarded Children is aiming to meet that need.

The organization is sponsoring the Island's first overnight respite house for retarded persons ages 8 and older for stays of one to 14 days.

The home, which is being leased by the group, is a duplex on Houston Street in Graniteville. It is the first of its kind in the borough, and only the second citywide, according to its organizers. (The other is in Queens.)

The benefits of the respite program are twofold.

"Not only are some parents in need of a surrogate parenting situation," explained Herman Hman, a member of the board of directors of AHRC, "but it will allow the child to interact with his peers."

"Staten Island's attitude has always been that we take care of our own," he continued. "This is for our neighbors who have a member of the family who is handicapped. It will be a welcome opportunity (for parents) for a little breathing space in the care of their son or daughter, day in and day out."

It will also help to develop a much-needed transition period for parents and children who, one day, will be separated.

"I've had so many calls from parents in their late 60s, who have a retarded child in their 40s," related Fishman. "Of course, the child is no longer a child. The person has been provided for in the most comfortable and protective situation possible... And then the parent finds he has a life-threatening illness, and he suddenly realizes the child must be provided for."

However, not every mentally

retarded person will be eligible to stay in the respite house, according to Margaret DelBagno, borough director of AHRC.

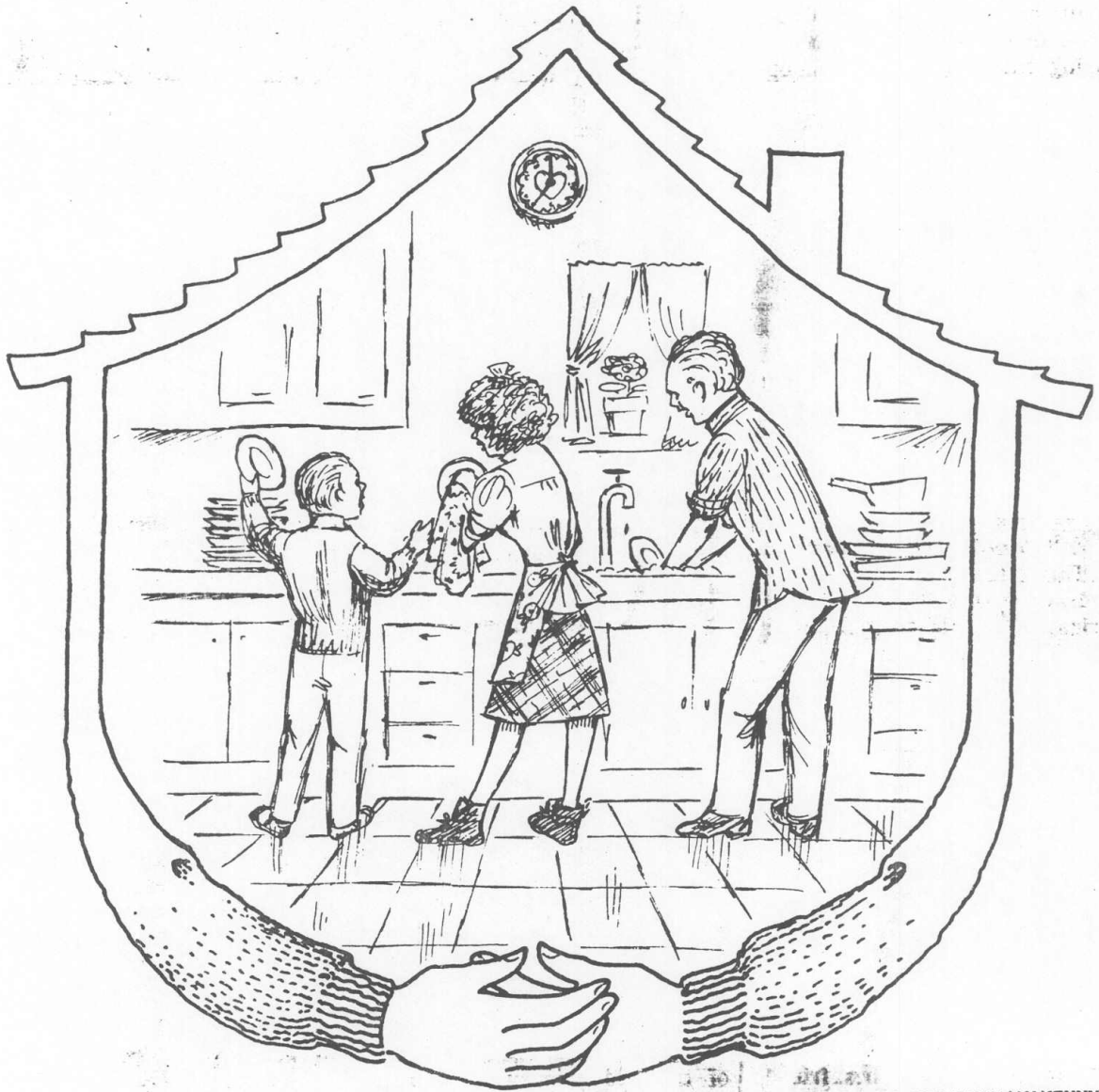
"A screening process has been set up... There must be an adherence to certain standards," she explained.

For example, the house can accommodate three guests, no younger than 8-years-old, for overnight stays of up to two weeks. Stays must be reserved in

advance; it is not an emergency respite. Guests must be in a school, a day program, a workshop or working. They must be ambulatory, toilet regulated and have no severe medical or behavioral problems.

In addition, parents must provide a reliable emergency backup person the respite can contact if they will be out of town during the period their child is in the home.

Fees are modest and are based



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on ability to pay.

Respite guests will be supervised by trained AHRC staff during two shifts between 3 p.m., when borders will begin to return home after school and work, and 9 a.m.

"They (the staff) are the best of who we have," explained Mrs. DelBagno. "They are trained to give out medication, (trained in) first aid, and they have drivers' licenses."

Guests will be encouraged, but not required, to pitch in with household chores, such as setting the table, cleaning up and assisting in the kitchen, according to Laura Zuercher, who will manage the respite and heads up one of AHRC's two group homes.

Explained Fishman: "They will be taken care of professionally . . . but it will be a breaking point in terms of what it is like to be away from home . . . It will be an alternative living style, but it will be a homelike experience in the community."

While Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly said she was not aware of AHRC's respite home, she said respite facilities are "one area where we need help.

"I think it is desperately needed," said Mrs. Connelly, who chairs the Assembly's Committee on Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. "As long as the building is kept up and it blends in with the community, it is a desperately needed component for the survival of a family with mentally retarded . . . And I know Mr. Fishman is truly dedicated."

The program has received a one-year grant of \$100,000 from the New York State Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, according to spokesman Lou Ganim.

While Fishman said the need for such a program on the Island is largely "unidentifiable," he and Mrs. DelBagno said the impetus to institute a respite house was based primarily on a waiting list

of 300 for entrance into an AHRC group home. "From that you can draw a parallel need," said Fishman.

"There is a large community of developmentally disabled and mentally retarded on Staten Island," he continued. "We believe we will have it (the respite house) utilized at a high rate."

The Staten Island Developmentally Disabled Services Office has pegged the number of mentally retarded people on Staten Island at 6,000, according to director Robert Witkowsky. He said about 2,500 mentally retarded take advantage of services offered on the Island.

While there is the possibility of a disparity in ages among respite guests at any given time, organizers say that won't present a problem.

"There will be a great deal of nurturing," said Mrs. Zuercher. "The younger children will be excited about being with the older ones . . . The socialization process is exciting."

In addition to three bedrooms, the apartment has a comfortably furnished living room, a dining room with a mirrored wall, and a full kitchen and bathroom. There is also a backyard where summer barbecues will be held.

While there is a color TV in the living room of the air-conditioned apartment, it will not provide a major form of entertainment.

"We're not custodial," said Mrs. DelBagno. "There will be a lot of socializing going on."

Trips AHRC group house members take will extend to respite house guests. Visits to Broadway shows, the beach, ball games and the Ice Capades are among the trips planned.

"We set no limits on them," said Fishman of those AHRC serves.

For additional information on the respite house, call Meghan Howe, AHRC respite screening coordinator, at 212-254-8203 on Mondays and Thursdays.