

# Hospital expected to get referral center contract

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Staten Island Hospital is expected to receive an \$85,000 state contract to operate a referral center for Staten Island parents of infants and young children with disabilities.

The state Education Department hopes to finalize plans for the Early Childhood Direction Center within a month, said Lawrence Gloeckler, an assistant commissioner for the department.

The center will make referrals, free of charge, for children under 5 with physical, mental or emotional disabilities.

Though Staten Island Hospital will make referrals to its own rehabilitation programs, "we are required by the state to function as a separate entity" and let parents know of all appropriate Island programs, said Maria Lariccia, a vice president at the hospital.

The center may be ready to open in November, she said. The hospital, which yesterday received notice of tentative approval, already has office space but will have to hire staff.

The center director will report to Kim Kubasek, ambulatory care manager, who wrote the grant proposal with Ms. Lariccia and Dr. Jose Rementeria, director of neonatology. Rementeria helped develop the Brooklyn center and suggested that the hospital apply to run the Island facility.

Staten Island Hospital was chosen over United Cerebral Palsy and the Staten Island Mental Health Society's Elizabeth W. Pouch Center for Special People.

The hospital's neonatal intensive care unit could have contributed to the selection. "We do like to see a strong connection with a perinatal center," Gloeckler said.

Dr. Gerald Spielman, director of the Pouch Center in West Brighton, said he disagrees with the state's penchant for putting referral centers in hospitals.

"Not all children with developmental disabilities graduate from intensive care units," he said recently.

Last month, he was elected president of the Staten Island Retardation and Disabilities Council, which helped lobby for an Island center.

Vacancies for children under 5 at the Pouch Center illustrate the need for a referral agency here, Spielman said.

"It's the first time in 14 years we're not full," he said, while other Island programs have waiting lists."

Pouch's vacancies are ironic because the center has been accused, falsely he said, of not making appropriate referrals to other local programs.

When the direction center opens, Staten Island Hospital may face similar accusations.

However most local care providers supported the drive to open an Island referral center.

So did Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly, D-West Brighton.

"You have no idea how rewarding it is after fighting this struggle for a number of years," she said. "You have to give a lot of credit to the Disabilities Council — they kept it on the front burner."

Opening an Island center "had a lot of opposition from (the state Education Department). I always got annoyed when they would tell us service is available in Brooklyn," Mrs. Connelly said.

Eight years ago, Staten Island had a direction center run by the Pouch Center. After a year, it was consolidated at Brooklyn's. One person from that unit works a half-day a week out of St. Vincent's Medical Center for Island referrals.

Last session, the state Legislature finally approved an extra \$300,000 in the Education Department's budget, from which the \$85,000 will be drawn for the Island Center, Mrs. Connelly said.