

THE ISLAND

Officials hear from parents of disabled

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Recounting stories of prolonged waiting lists and inadequate services for their disabled children, parents spoke directly to city and state officials at the 16th annual legislative breakfast of the Staten Island Retardation and Disabilities Council (SIRDC) yesterday in the Staaten, West Brighton.

"The law mandates a free and appropriate education for the disabled," said Martha Klimuk, the mother of two teen-age girls, one of whom is blind and developmentally disabled.

She explored the lack of appropriate educational programs on Staten Island that left families with no choice but to travel into Manhattan and Brooklyn.

"We need to keep our children here where we have chosen to make our homes, and encourage them to be productive citizens in our community," she continued.

Tricia DiMaggio, mother of two disabled children, referred to services such as Super Start, which are currently available in Brooklyn, and questioned the lack of similarly productive programs on the Island.

"Why can't we service our children?" she asked.

The legislators listened to the plight of the parents, uniformly promising to focus on the expansion of funds and services for the borough.

Thomas A. Maul, commissioner of the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, lauded the progress already made in care for the disabled.

"Twenty-five years ago we would have been talking about institutions and not the best options for the individual," he said.

However, he conceded the jour-



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At the annual legislative breakfast of the Staten Island Retardation and Disabilities Council, parent Tricia DiMaggio, left, chats with, from left, vice chairwoman Donna Long, Mary Sullivan and chairwoman Maureen Brennick.

ney would not be complete until the waiting lists for residential care were eliminated.

In response to the need for more beds, Assemblyman Eric Vitaliano (D-Mid-Island) predicted the approval of as many as twice the number of beds requested at the state level, thus ensuring more beds become available on the Island.

"We're trying to assure that dollars reach Staten Island in a meaningful and effective way," he said.

State Sen. Vincent Gentile (D-

Brooklyn/East Shore) also promised the passage of a values-based budget that would include the issues addressed at the breakfast, acknowledging that the government "still has a problem dealing adequately with its most vulnerable population."

Maureen Brennick, chairwoman of the SIRDC, said she felt encouraged by the legislators' response and concern for the issues presented at the breakfast.

"But it's only the beginning. Now they need to backup their commitment with the monies to

do what needs to be done."

Also in attendance were: Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly (D-North Shore), Councilman Jerome X. O'Donovan (D-North Shore), Assemblyman Robert Straniere (R-South Shore), and Councilman Steve Fiala (R-South Shore).

Represented by staff members were: Rep. Vito Fossella Jr. (R-Staten Island), Sen. John J. Marchi (R-Staten Island), Councilman John Fusco (R-Mid-Island) and Borough President Guy V. Molinari.