

Caregivers meet those who need care

Annual legislative breakfast brings together 260 people

by CHARLIE GOULD
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Edward Fanuzzi needs help caring for his 4-year-old grandson. He asked for help with the autistic child yesterday at the Staten Island Retardation and Disabilities Council's annual Legislative breakfast in the Staaten, West Brighton. The event is designed to bring together disabled people, their families, legislators, service providers and officials of the state office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (MRDD).

Fanuzzi, of Mariners Harbor, asked to tell the some 260 attendees why he needs help caring for his grandson, John.

"I need different services, mainly respite care, [and] after school services," he said. "I'm the primary care taker. He's autistic. He doesn't speak... This is why he needs help."

Donna Long, chairwoman of the Staten Island Retardation and Disabilities Council, said she wanted to highlight New York State Cares, a plan forwarded by Gov. George Pataki. The program aims to eliminate the waiting list in New York for residential placement and services. Funding for 1999-2000 totaling \$24.6 million will go toward creating 980 beds, 100 case management positions, 100 day service slots and \$1.3 million for new family support services for people waiting at home.

Bob Witowski, the Staten Island Director of Developmental Disabilities Services Offices (DDSO), said the breakfast was a chance for people to put issues on the



Meeting at a legislative breakfast in the Staaten are, from left, Bob Witowski, Laura Kennedy, Ed Fanuzzi, Donna Long, Doug Wetlesen and Thomas Maul.

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table. He said Staten Islanders tend to have a larger turnout than any other borough "because Staten Island is known as a closely knit community, where people help out those less fortunate than ourselves."

Thomas Maul, the commissioner of OMRDD, said it was imperative to take advantage of the dialogue yesterday. He said it was an excellent event because big problems regarding the "needs, wants and desires of families in the Staten Island area" are spelled out.

Elizabeth Kennedy, 21, of New Brighton, said she planned to discuss the impact family support services have had on her family. Her sister, Julia, is developmentally disabled.

Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly (D-North Shore), one of several legislators at the breakfast, recently complained that the Island has been shortchanged by the state Division of Disability Determinations (DDS) of the office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. Its role is to adjudicate claims for the Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income programs. In New York City, it has offices in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens. Mrs. Connelly wrote to Brian J. Wing, commissioner of Temporary and Disability Assistance, outlining why the borough deserves its own branch.

"Most think we're just a hop,

skip and jump away [from Manhattan]," she wrote. "Well, we are not. For a large number of State Islanders, whether they are disabled or not, traveling to Manhattan is very time-consuming, costly, tedious and, to put it mildly, nerve-wracking."

Also attending the function were: Assemblyman Robert Straniere; Councilmen Jim Oddo and Stephen Fiala; state Sen. Vincent Gentile, and Tracey Durfee, the special assistant to Maul. Representatives were sent from the offices of Assemblyman Eric Vitaliano; Rep. Vito Fossella; state Sen. John Marchi (R-Staten Island); Borough President Guy V. Molinari, and Councilman Jerome O'Donovan (D-North Shore).

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