

Disabled are forgotten in Albany budget fight

■ Programs for the developmentally disabled may have to turn young adults away because promised state funding increases haven't materialized

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As the budget battle in Albany rolls into its 11th week, some of Staten Island's most vulnerable residents may soon fall victim to the partisan bickering.

Many of the Island's developmentally disabled young adults who are scheduled to graduate from area high schools and special education programs in the next few months may not be able to continue getting the professional attention they need if a budget isn't passed quickly and promised funds released.

Even though Gov. George Pataki and the Legislature agree on the

funding level for day care and special education, the programs will not see a penny of new money until the overall budget is passed.

For the Island's developmentally disabled young adults and their families, any break from regimented — and state-funded — programs could prove devastating.

Angela Johnson of Huguenot, whose 21-year old daughter TinaMarie is developmentally disabled and epileptic, said her daughter will graduate from a special education program this month, but may be denied a place in a "day-habilitation," or "day-hab," program. The program she wants her daughter to attend, On Your Mark in West Brighton, does not have enough state funds to cover TinaMarie's matriculation costs.

"Keeping the interaction with other kids is so important to TinaMarie," said Ms. Johnson, whose daughter has been enrolled in special programs for almost all of her life. "If these kids fall back again and get them back into a normal routine."

"There are [developmentally disabled] people aging out of the public school system," said As-



ADVANCE PHOTO ■ MICHAEL McWEENEY

Angela Johnson and her daughter, TinaMarie, at home in Huguenot.

semblyman James F. Brennan (D-Brooklyn), chairman of the Committee on Mental Health and Retardation. "But slots for those people [at special education programs] will only open up when the final budget is approved."

While state lawmakers continue to haggle over a budget that

was due April 1, the state government is kept running by stop-gap emergency spending bills that have to be passed every two weeks.

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