

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.

Instead of the increased level

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of developmental disabilities funding contained in both the governor's and the Legislature's budget proposals, programs are being funded at the lower levels of the prior fiscal year.

As more disabled people enter the system, the lack of new funds means there will almost certainly be a waiting list at many of Staten Island's 62 day and special education programs.

Despite a history of political stalemates over the state budget, at least one local politician says this year's budget battle is more contentious than any in recent memory.

This governor doesn't even seem interested [in negotiating], said Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly (D-North Shore), the former chairwoman of the Assembly's Committee on Mental Health and Retardation. [Democratic Gov. Mario] Cuomo stayed in Albany and argued but was concerned ... but [Pataki] seems happy with the way this is going.

The governor and the Legislature have offered budget bills containing money for the first installment of a \$225 million, five-year plan called New York State Cares, a program that will provide housing for New York's developmentally disabled residents. Pataki has been roundly praised around the country and the state for advocating the program. If imple-

mented as expected, the money will help clear the 6,700-person, statewide waiting list that exists for out-of-home residential housing.

Elizabeth Fromkin, the deputy executive director for Lifestyles for the Disabled, said the budget stalemate could affect roughly 100 developmentally disabled young adults on Staten Island.

Since we started in 1994, clients can stay as long as they want to ... and some could stay their whole life," said Fromkin. "But the people who want to come in now won't be able to."

Many of the programs provide some of the only personal contact that developmentally disabled people will have with people other

than family members. And the day-hab and special education programs on Staten Island teach clients job skills that, depending on the severity of a person's disability, can lead to full- or part-time employment.

"Even for people who can't move out, [the programs] continue to provide jobs on-site," said Donna Long, the director of community relations at the 36-client On Your Mark day hab program. "The goal is to have people become as independent as possible."

For families with a developmentally disabled relative, the hospitals and special education programs funded by the state are vital. Angela Johnson's father-in-law, Hugh Johnson, for instance,

helped take care of TinaMarie throughout his granddaughter's life, making it possible for Angela Johnson to hold down a steady job. Recently, however, he was hit by a car and has been hospitalized ever since. Angela Johnson said she is concerned about what will happen if TinaMarie is unable to enter a program.

"Unlike most graduates, TinaMarie has no opportunity to continue her education because of her handicap," Ms. Johnson wrote in a letter to Mrs. Connelly. "What's more disturbing and heart wrenching for us as parents is that she will probably not be employable in any regular capacity. The only recourse mentally challenged people have are special programs

funded by federal and state government."

Pataki has said he would like the Legislature to pass, in a stand-alone bill, funding for New York State Cares and other programs for the developmentally disabled. However, the Democrat-controlled Assembly says it will not pass the budget piecemeal. Even though it agrees with the governor on funding for the program, the Assembly wants Pataki to nix his proposed cuts to student loan programs, Medicaid and other programs Democrats hold dear.

Although there are some budget strategies the Assembly may soon deploy to try to get a budget agreement, there appears to be no quick fix.