

With the hope of garnering support from Staten Island's elected officials — especially as the state assembly is about to begin budget deliberations — the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Council (SIDDC) held its annual legislative breakfast at the Staaten, West Brighton, yesterday.

Legislators and area council members were served up a platefull of issues, including the elimination of waiting lists for special services, pay raises to thwart off a rising attrition rate among special services workers, and a continuing need to develop community awareness, sensitivity and acceptance of people with disabilities.

Considering that it has been 25 years since former Gov. Hugh Carey shut the doors for good on the Willowbrook facility (a point of major contention throughout not only the Island, but the state and nation as well), SIDDC members say much more needs to be done to properly care for Islanders with disabilities.

"We have seen tremendous growth since the [Willowbrook] decree," said SIDDC Chairwoman Donna Long, speaking to what was described as the largest crowd ever to attend the breakfast meeting.

The deinstitutionalization process for individuals with developmental disabilities has been, in large part, successful," Ms. Long said.

She warned, however, that even though it has been 25 years since the deinstitutionalization process got under way, and even though programs have increased in both number and sophistication, SIDDC expects an increase in opposition as more residential facilities for the disabled move into area neighborhoods. And with an additional \$29 million funding for New York Cares, a two-year old initiative by Gov. George Pataki that provides group home accommodations for the disabled, there will be an increase in residential development for the disabled, according to Ms. Long.

"Property values do not go down," Ms. Long said. "On the contrary, they often go up. We are surprised when people angrily object . . . using language that is due to a lack of information."

Long was referring to the mandatory meetings held by community boards, which must approve the establishment of a group home or service center for the disabled.

Because there can be opposition to such facilities, SIDDC is pushing a full-court-press to educate the community with factual information and dispel any myths that exist.

Support from local council members was particularly strong.

Councilman Jay O'Donovan (D-North Shore), said he was committed to dispelling the myths surrounding group homes, and he would ensure his future appointees to the community board

would be the same.

"The issue is awareness," O'Donovan said. "We suffer the NIMBY — not in my backyard — syndrome. When I made appointments to the community board I never asked if they were opposed to it [group homes], but I'm going to do it now and their answer better be positive.

"NIMBY just doesn't cut it here," said Councilman Stephen Fiala.

To be sure, Assemblywoman Elizabeth Connelly (D-North Shore) said that many people had great concern over the signing of the consent decree abolishing Willowbrook, and there is continued opposition to the establishment of group homes. In fact, Connelly said, "we are getting calls and threats.

"But, we believe what is right and should not have to ask permission to live in a community," Connelly stated, in expressing her displeasure with the community boards.

"Our kids are a lot nicer than many of the kids on the street," she said.

And with bipartisan agreement leading the way, Assemblyman Robert Straniere (R-South Shore) said it was time to get more funding for the programs sponsored by SIDDC.

Also being presented to lawmakers was a request to increase the salaries of those who care for and educate the disabled, in an effort to stabilize the system's workforce.

Because they are paid far less than their counterparts in the public school system, Kathy Kennedy, director of Developmental Services, said the attrition rate among service providers is at an all-time high.

"Traditionally, people have chosen to work in this field because of the inherent rewards in working with people with developmental disabilities," Ms. Kennedy said. "But much has changed. Many staff now work two or three jobs in order to support themselves and their families."

Ms. Kennedy said that, due to the low unemployment rate, there is a smaller recruitment pool. And with a high staff turnover rate — running at 25-30 percent — and a 20-percent vacancy rate, combined with low salaries, many who work with those with disabilities cannot make a reasonable living.