

25 years after Willowbrook

■ **Anniversary celebration will honor three New York governors for their roles in transforming the system**

"... Retarded persons, regardless of the degree of handicapping conditions, are capable of physical, intellectual, emotional and social growth, and ... a certain level of affirmative intervention and programming is necessary if that capacity for growth and development is to be preserved, and regression prevented."

— Willowbrook Consent Decree, signed April 30, 1975

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When Gov. Hugh L. Carey signed the Willowbrook Consent Decree in 1975, New York state triggered a tsunami of national reforms providing safe, attractive, and homey environments with personalized care for the mentally retarded and others with developmental disabilities.

No other governmental act, human services advocates say,



Hugh Carey



Mario Cuomo



George Pataki

has had such a deep impact on American society in such a short period.

"The placement of the developmentally disabled in community residences, the growth of voluntary agencies, the expansion of special education and day programs along with the training of direct care workers, therapists, teachers and administrators in colleges and universities can be linked to the judgment" (or decree), said Henry J. Kennedy, a New Brighton resident who is co-chairing a 25th anniversary celebration of the signing.

"This judgment not only changed the way the developmentally disabled are cared for in New York," he said, "but has had a profound impact throughout the country."

Local and state human service

advocates are planning a day-long symposium — called "Social Justice Has Prevailed: A Conference in Celebration of the Willowbrook Consent Judgment" — to highlight the events that led to the passage of the landmark legislation as well as its effects.

Panel discussions by former Willowbrook residents, parents of former residents, lawyers, government administrators and other human services advocates will focus on public policy issues, including the role of higher education in professional careers in the field.

The event is slated for May 2 at the College of Staten Island, the former site of the Willowbrook State School, which became the national catch phrase for the warehousing of the mentally retarded in inhumane conditions.

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James P. Murphy of Manhattan, first vice president of the Association for the Help of Retarded Children and a former chair of the CUNY Board of Trustees, is also co-chairing the celebration.

At an awards luncheon, three New York governors — Carey, Mario M. Cuomo and George E. Pataki — will receive CSI's President's Medal for their roles in transforming the system for caring for the developmentally disabled.

Gov. Carey will be honored for his efforts in negotiating a settlement to the litigation brought by more than 5,000 parents of Willowbrook children and for signing the judgment.

Gov. Cuomo will be recognized for his work in continuing the implementation of the judgment and in eventually closing Willowbrook and most of other similar state-run institutions.

And Gov. Pataki will be honored for his New York State Creating Alternatives in Residential Environments and Services (NYS-CARES) initiative, which will phase in over the next four years enough community residences to eradicate the huge list of developmentally disabled adults awaiting living spaces.

RESIDENTIAL PROGRAM SITES

Community Board	Certified Sites	Residents
1	60	243
2	37	347
3	30	240
Totals:	127	830

THE SITE SELECTION LAW —

also called the Padavan Law — allows New York municipalities three options when faced with a proposed site for a community residence for the developmentally disabled. In New York City, a community board is considered a municipality. Community board input is required, however, it has no binding power.

THE COMMUNITY BOARD MAY:

1. Accept the proposed site.
2. Suggest alternative sites.
3. Object to the proposed site on the grounds of saturation, that is, the proposed site is within a neighborhood that already has too many similar residences.

The saturation objection is intended to prevent the establishment of "ghettos" for the developmentally disabled, since the overall aim of the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) is integration and socialization into the wider community.

If a community board claims saturation or if the sponsoring agency rejects alternative sites, the supporting agency may appeal to the OMRDD. After conducting hearings, the commissioner of the OMRDD makes a final determination on the site.

If the community board appeals the commissioner's decision, the battle moves to the Appellate Division of State Supreme Court and then, if necessary, to the State Court of Appeals.

THE ROAD TO COMMUNITY RESIDENCES

How Staten Island went from Willowbrook to the need for 40 additional homes for the developmentally disabled in the next four years:

1965

Staten Island Advance publishes a series of articles called "What's Wrong With Willowbrook?" examining the deteriorating conditions for the mentally retarded at the Willowbrook State School. A month later, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy conducts a surprise inspection of the institution, describing it as a "snake pit."

1967

Some 27,000 people with developmental disabilities live in New York state institutions.

1971

The Advance publishes another series exposing horrific living conditions at Willowbrook.

1972

TV documentary by relatively unknown journalist Geraldo Rivera brings the sensational Willowbrook story to the nation's consciousness, prompting widespread public outrage and a class-action lawsuit by the parents of more than 5,000 Willowbrook children against the state and then-Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller.

1974

State schools renamed "developmental centers."

1975

Willowbrook Consent Decree signed, laying the groundwork for national reforms in the care, education and housing of people with developmental disabilities. A federal judge orders Willowbrook's population reduced to 250 by 1986, with former residents transferred to more humane environments, such as community residences.

1978

The state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) begins operation as a separate entity from the Office of Mental Hygiene and is responsible for the prevention and early detection of developmental disabilities and for the care, treatment, habitation and rehabilitation of the affected population.

1978

Site Selection Law — also called the Padavan Law, named after state Sen. Frank Padavan — takes effect, creating a procedural framework for the establishment of community residences for people with developmental disabilities. The law is designed, in part, to prevent the over-saturation of houses for the developmentally disabled on a particular block or in a particular neighborhood, in essence isolating them from the wider community.

Early 1980s

Numerous local battles over the establishment of community residences for the developmentally disabled erupt across the borough.

1987

Willowbrook, at this time called the Staten Island Developmental Center, closes.

1990

President George Bush signs the Americans With Disabilities Act guaranteeing people with disabilities the same rights to employment and access to public facilities as other citizens.

1998

Just over 2,100 people live in state-run developmental centers.

1998

Gov. George Pataki announces New York State Creating Alternatives in Residential Environments and Services (NYS-CARES) initiative, a comprehensive five-year plan to eliminate the waiting list for out-of-home residential services throughout the state.

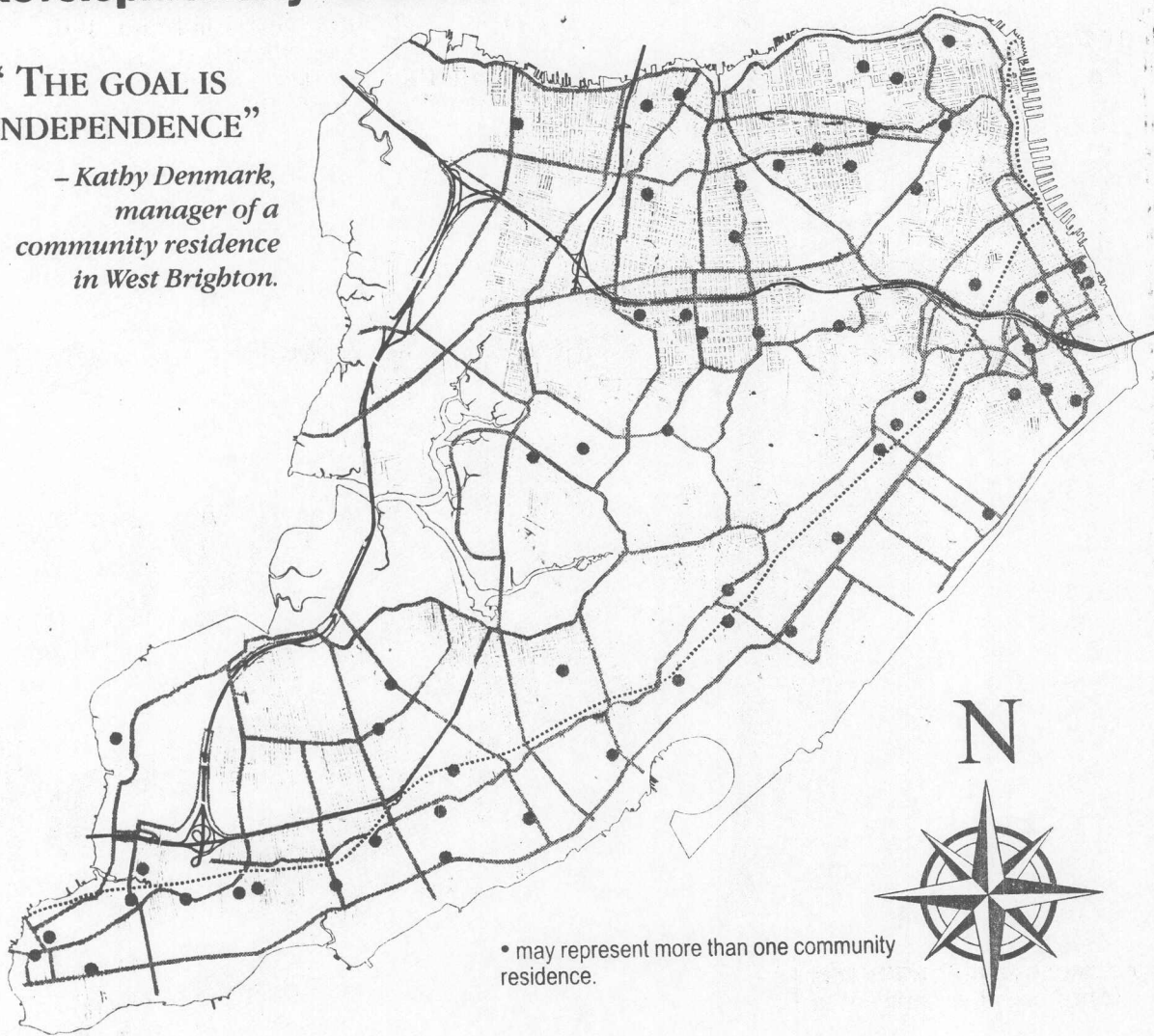
2000

Developmental centers population reduced to 1,000. Local human service providers say Staten Island needs about 40 new community residences in the next four years to reduce a waiting list of more than 200 Islanders.

Community residences for the developmentally disabled

“THE GOAL IS INDEPENDENCE”

– *Kathy Denmark, manager of a community residence in West Brighton.*



• may represent more than one community residence.