

## A Very Special Place

A Very Special Place (AVSP), a Dongan Hills agency that operates five homes in the borough, conducts citywide criminal checks, unless an applicant has worked in another part of New York or in another state. In that case, a statewide check is performed. The agency does not administer drug tests.

AVSP also requires at least two weeks of on-site training. Further certification is available for intervention techniques, administering medication and first aid.

Each AVSP community residence employs a residential director with a bachelor's degree and at least four years' experience, one of which must be in a supervisory role, and an assistant residential director, who must have related experience. Direct care staff needs depend on the number of residents.

"The direct care workers are not the only people working here," says Diane Buglioli, deputy

executive director of AVSP. "There's a whole team of people — of which they are members — with a mix of backgrounds, experience, education and responsibilities. But the assumption that everyone comes in from high school would be erroneous."

"Wash your hands now, before you eat, because your dinner is going to get cold," Vanessa Mason says in a maternal tone.

Ms. Mason is a direct care worker at an AVSP-run community residence in Dongan Hills for moderately to profoundly mentally retarded adults in their 40s and 50s.

For her, it's a rewarding career choice.

"At the end of the day, I can go home and say I did a good deed," she says.

### Community Resources

Community Resources for the Developmentally Disabled

(CRDD), a Travis-based agency that operates seven homes here, conducts federal criminal background checks and drug tests on potential employees.

"It is costly but we feel it is necessary to protect our program participants and residents in our homes," says Dana Magee, executive director.

If allegations of resident abuse arise, CRDD suspends the accused staff member without pay until the charges are cleared up. Even using foul language can constitute abuse.

"It happens infrequently, but it happens," admits Barbara Devaney, director of development and community relations.

### On Your Mark

On Your Mark, a West Brighton-based agency operating 15 community residences here, does not require criminal background checks or drug testing. The agency

provides at least two weeks of training, both on-site and at the agency. College degrees are not required for supervisory positions but related experience is necessary.

Those requirements were enough to satisfy Lorraine DeSantis, whose son, David, 21, lives at On Your Mark's community residence in Dongan Hills.

"It is like handing a 2-year-old to a baby-sitter or dropping him off at a day care center you've never tried before," she says.

Like most parents with adult children living in community residences, Ms. DeSantis says she visits often, has developed relationships with staff members and feels free to discuss her concerns with supervisors.

"You need to develop trust in the people that care for him," she says. "It alleviates some of the anxiety."

### Low pay, high commitment

Average annual pay for direct care staff is about \$19,000 a year. And supervisors' salaries range from \$25,000 to \$45,000.

In today's booming job market human services advocates say, takes a high level of commitment to stay with such relatively low paying positions, which stands as a testament to the devotion of many staffers.

"People have to love the job," says Jennifer Benoit, executive director of AVSP. "There would be any other reason to be in the field. You must like the work and be suited for it."

"In general, the people who are in the business of providing care do an excellent job," says Ms. Rausch of the OMRDD. "It takes a special person to work with people who have developmental disabilities and those are the special people who go into this line of work."