

# Threats won't close baby home

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Bomb threats have posted police outside a Brooklyn boarder-baby home that will accept a Staten Island baby with AIDS when the residence opens tomorrow.

Although staff members evacuated the Children's Center in East Flatbush Monday night after a threatening phone call at 6:30 p.m., police found no explosives. At least three babies, including a 15-month-old Staten Island boy, will move in tomorrow as planned, said Phyllis Susser, executive director of Herbert Birch Services.

The 15-year-old, not-for-profit agency holds a contract with the state Office of Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) to run the 10-bed residence for boarder babies who are developmentally disabled and have Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Boarder babies are infants being kept in hospitals while awaiting foster-care placement.

After OMRDD Commissioner Arthur Webb called Police Commissioner Benjamin Ward yesterday, police from the 67th Precinct were assigned to 24-hour surveillance at the home, Ms. Susser said.

"I have to hope that it's a quiet night crime-wise," she said last night.

Police responded immediately to the bomb threat that prompted the Monday night evacuation, she said. According to Ms. Susser, the caller said: "We don't want those babies here. The bomb's going off at 7 o'clock." At 9:30, presumably the same man phoned again to say: "We know you called the police. You shouldn't have done it. Now we're really going to get you."

With the memory of a Queens boarder-baby home torched by angry community residents in early 1987 before the residence eventually opened, "of course I'm worried," Ms. Susser said. "I also have to hope that the staff doesn't get so scared that they leave."

While the executive director was speaking, a staff member stopped by to say she wouldn't be frightened away. "The commu-



Henry Marquit

nity has to see that we're not going to be scared away," Ms. Susser said.

Birch Services encountered community opposition when it opened the three-story brick home as a residence for mentally retarded children in 1979, but "this has never happened," she said, referring to the bomb threats.

Still, she is hopeful that the boarder-baby home will win over the community, as the former group home did. The mentally retarded residents have been relocated to another Birch home in Brooklyn.

The Children's Center will provide 24-hour care for the AIDS boarder babies, and Birch Services plans to develop and monitor its own foster-care network in the community.

The state-contracted home is not included in the 61 child service agencies contracted by the city Human Resources Administration (HRA) to care for boarder babies.

Although the most current HRA figures put the number of boarder babies citywide at 70 as of Oct. 31, 1988, critics have said the number is much higher. Also, critics have

charged that boarder babies are being returned to drug-addicted mothers previously considered unfit by the city.

The city does not calculate the percentage of boarder babies who have AIDS, but yesterday in the



Ruth Mullen

city system there were seven, according to HRA spokesman Earl Weber.

"Ninety-five percent of children with AIDS are or will be developmentally disabled," Ms. Susser said. "The disease affects the central nervous system . . . and as the disease progresses, so does the developmental disability."

If a mother tests positive for the HIV virus that causes AIDS, all her children will test positive, said Ruth Mullen, residence manager. But about 40 to 50 percent will test negative at a 15-month retest.

Babies who develop AIDS in the first year "don't usually live past 2," she said. Of the babies who remain HIV-positive after the 15-month mark, "the average child seems to be living to 3 or 4." Those infants develop ARC (AIDS-related complex), and then AIDS.

Birch's goal is to deter the developmental deterioration and to improve the children's "quality of life" for as long as they live.

The Staten Island baby, now in St. Vincent's Medical Center, is severely physically handicapped and developmentally delayed. The baby cannot crawl, said Henry Marquit, program coordinator for Birch.

HRA's Special Services for Children referred the boy to the Children's Center, Ms. Mullen said. Though Ms. Mullen could not

provide details about the Staten Island baby, she said his mother is still living, "but there has been no contact with the parent."

"It is our hope that we establish contact with the family wherever possible," Marquit said.

Most AIDS boarder babies have not lived outside a hospital, Ms. Mullen said. "They were either abandoned or they're too sick to be cared for at home."

A typical family situation is that "the mother has AIDS, or at least is HIV positive. She's an IV drug user or she's having sexual relations with one, and all of the social chaos that goes with the drug culture is part of the child's world," Ms. Mullen said.

Residential care of the babies in the Children's Center costs \$200 a day per client, compared to \$800 a day in a hospital, Ms. Susser said. The day care and special education components cost about \$20,000 a year per child.

Developmental specialists will work with the babies, and the residence will provide 24-hour nursing care. A pediatrician affiliated with Downstate Medical Center will examine the children daily, and there is an "infection isolation room" for a baby who might have a contagious rash or cold but does not require hospitalization.

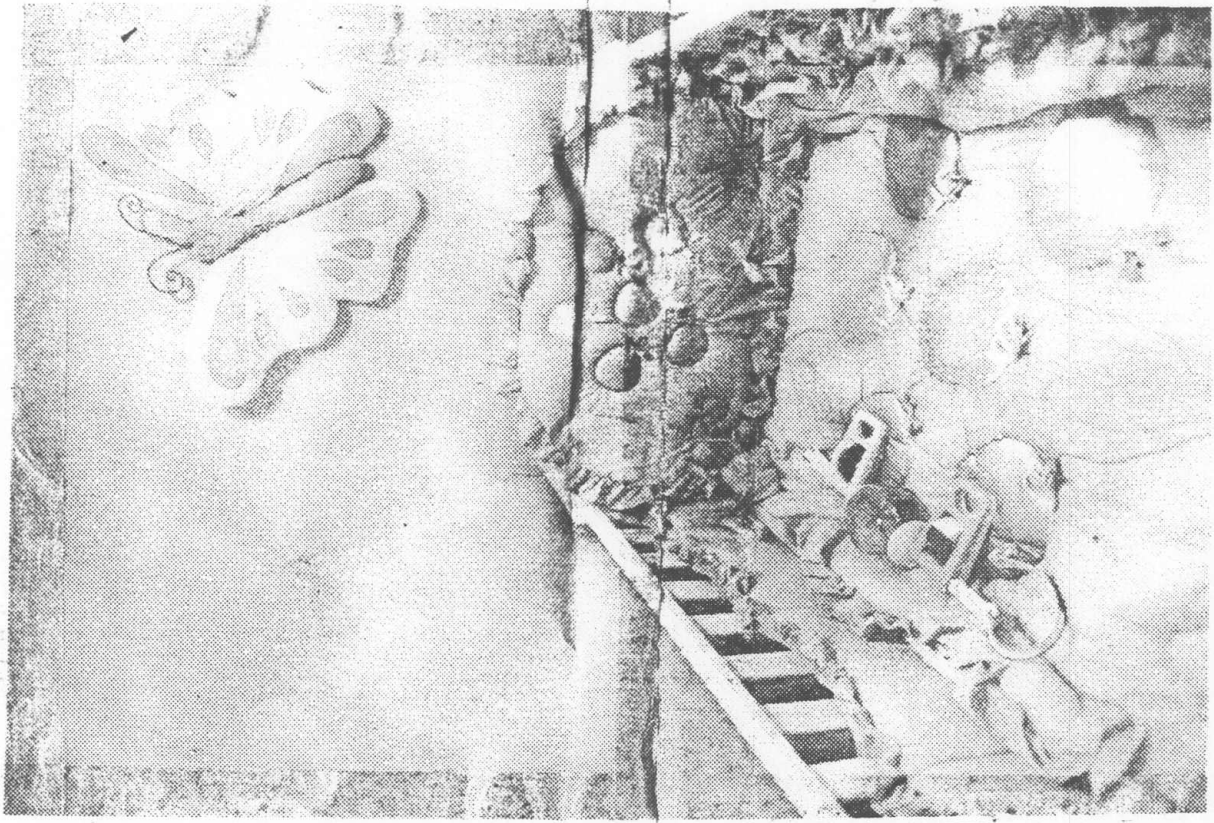
All infectious medical waste will be disposed of in accordance with state and city "red bag" regulations, Ms. Mullen said.

Staff will wear gloves when changing diapers, as is required in any hospital or day-care facility, she said. "We're not going to get crazy. Our workers are not going to use gloves to bathe the children — they don't need to."

"We're going to make them as comfortable and happy as they can be," Ms. Mullen said. "Every child has that right." To that end, the home is brightly decorated and filled with stimulating toys. "Everything is brand new and was chosen with love and care."

"The best thing we can do for these children is provide normal experiences," Ms. Mullen said. Which is one reason she is anxious for the police presence not to be needed.

"That's not my idea of normal," she said.



A toy in the crib and a butterfly on the wall wait for a baby to be moved into the room.



Phyllis Sussner is executive director of Herbert Birch Services, which will run the facility.





This is one of the rooms set up for boarder babies in a new home for babies with AIDS set up in Brooklyn.

ADVANCE PHOTOS/HILTON FLORES