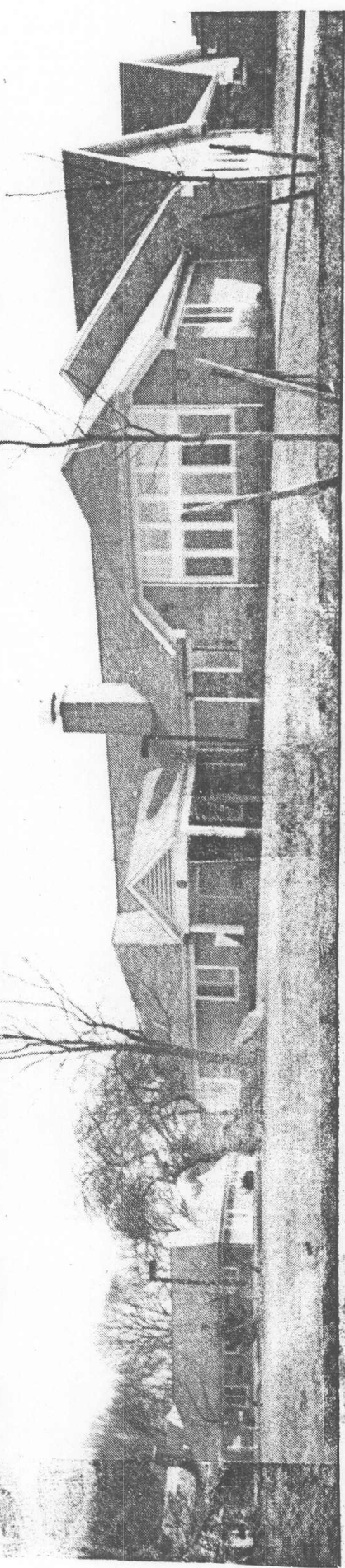


NYC-based community care

# A more creative approach



One of the brand new intensive care units on the grounds of the former Staten Island Development Center.

By **Stephen Madarasz**  
CSEA Communications Associate

**NEW YORK** — The unique challenge of transforming state developmental centers into community-based mental retardation facilities in New York City was the focus of a recent tour by CSEA and Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) officials.

CSEA President Joe McDermott and Region II President George Boncoraglio joined with OMRDD Commissioner Arthur Webb and other officials during the day-long visit to Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Service Office (DDSO) — formerly Staten Island Developmental Center — and Howard Park, a satellite facility of the Bernard Fineson/Queens Developmental Center.

The CSEA group used the opportunity to compare the New York City operations with similar upstate facilities.

“There’s no question that progress is being made in the city,” said McDermott. “But the pace of the progress and the smooth transition from developmental centers to community residences still isn’t as good as we’d like to see. . . . what we’re seeing upstate.”

The CSEA leader added that this was not due to a lack of commitment from OMRDD so much as the practical difficulties of undertaking any project of this kind in New York City.

“There are a whole range of problems from real estate costs to community resistance to inadequate pay to transportation and child care difficulties that are just harder to deal with in New York City than in upstate communities,” McDermott said. “But the answer isn’t to give up — it’s a matter of finding more creative ways to make a community system work. Based on what I’ve seen, it can be done.”

“We need a better balance between the state and the private sector on community residences,” added Boncoraglio. “We need to see more state-run community residences of all types opened up in the city because when clients are ready to move out of the developmental centers, the only options are to send them upstate or to the private sector operations. That’s just not right, they belong here in their own communities.”

In fact, many of the clients remaining in state facilities are multiply disabled or so severely handicapped that most private agencies will not even accept them.

The frontline staff in OMRDD provides an essential service to some of the most difficult yet vulnerable people in our society,” said McDermott. “The care and concern they have for each individual client has to be seen to be believed. So we as a union have a responsibility to make sure they get the help they need to provide this care in the best possible setting.”

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# OMRDD changes bring 'a whole new world'

STATEN ISLAND — It took some time and adjustment, but CSEA members who experienced the transformation of their developmental centers into group homes and community-based day treatment centers have seen some positive and at times surprising results.

"It's a whole new world out here and it took people some time to get used to it," said Staten Island Developmental Center CSEA Local 429 President John Jackson. "But the working conditions are a lot better for our members and that makes a big difference for the clients, too."

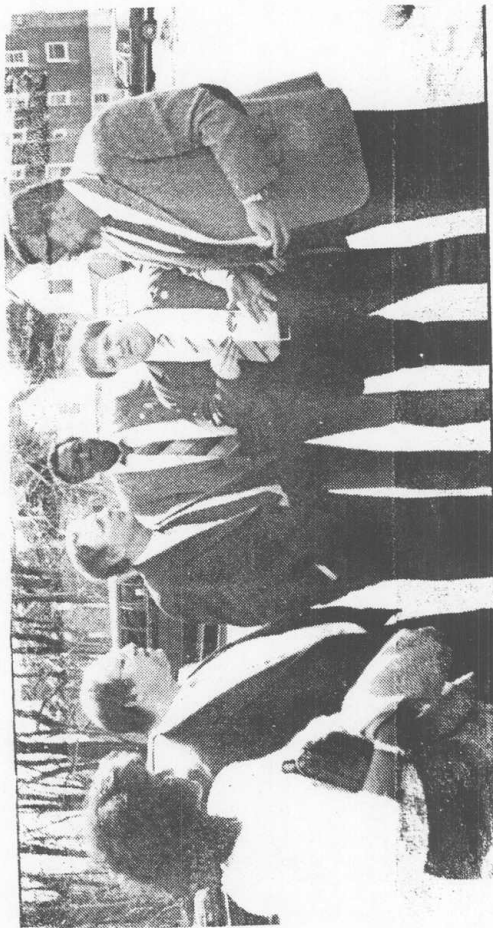
Jackson's remarks were echoed by Craig Developmental Center CSEA Local 429 President Kathy Button.

"The whole experience was very different from what people expected," she said. "People were scared — you're talking about individuals who had worked in a developmental center 20 to 30 years who didn't know if they could handle a completely different setting."

"A lot of people didn't realize how much they had to give until they got out there into the community residences," she added. "But they can do the job and they're starting to see a whole different side of the clients."

The Craig experience stands as a model of orderly transition. Nearly all CSEA employees of the developmental center were able to transfer directly into the group homes and services, including operational staff. Almost unbelievably, most people received their top choices of work locations, shifts and pass days through the help of a computerized bidding process.

While the Staten Island staff is only about half of what it was several years ago, CSEA-OMRDD cooperation saved the jobs of more than 1,000 members through retraining, providing opportunities to transfer to other metropolitan area facilities and an unprecedented program for lateral transfers to upstate facilities at state expense.



CSEA President Joe McDermott, third from left, listens while Staten Island DDSO Facility Director Robert Witkowsky, right, makes a point during a recent tour of New York City-based group homes and services for the mentally retarded. Also making the tour are, from left, Craig Developmental Center CSEA Local 405 President Kathy Button; CSEA mental hygiene consultant Marty Langer, Staten Island Developmental Center CSEA Local 429 President John Jackson and CSEA Region II President George Boncoraglio.

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