

Staten Island Advance

Lifestyle

B1

BUSINESS ■ EDITORIAL ■ TV ■ ENTERTAINMENT ■ COMICS

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 1989



Lynn Braniff uses the phone to call her sister. Her mother, Sonia, is on the couch.

ADVANCE PHOTO/MIKE FALCO

Page 1 of 2

More options urged for handicapped

By SHERRY BOSCHERT
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Caring for a mentally, physically or emotionally handicapped family member can be a lifelong project — or, sometimes, longer.

When parents die, or when families can no longer cope, where do disabled adults go?

According to local advocates for the disabled, too many people are left in the lurch when loved ones neglect to plan for the future, even though they may provide tireless care while living. And those who do plan often have insufficient options available to them on Staten Island.

The result: Retarded adults who wind up living on the streets; individuals with mental illness whose lives fall apart, and physically impaired people forced to choose between a nursing home or nothing. The case of developmentally disabled adults has received the most attention, and has perhaps the most obvious solutions.

Since 1975, when a federal judge ordered the former Willowbrook State School to close, the state has gradually developed group homes and services for the retarded.

In many ways, the effort has been a success. "There's still a lot to be done," said Sonia Braniff of Stapleton, whose daughter Lynn is mildly retarded, "but it's a matter of cleaning up the act, picking up the pieces we might have forgotten."

Others say, however, that those missing pieces allow too many people to fall through the cracks.

"It's frightening. It's not like years ago," said Richard Salinardi, work study coordinator at Richmond Occupational Training Center, Clifton. "As bad as the institutional life was — and I started at Willowbrook — there was a certain area where they could function, and there was a safety within that area."

Retarded teen-agers placed in city-sponsored foster care because their families can't cope with them "age out" of the system at 21. State-run community beds aren't always available, and some clients who are placed in group homes or adult foster care may leave for some reason and not be followed, ending up on the streets.

"We're seeing many, many more cases like that," Salinardi said.

About 150 developmentally disabled people are on waiting lists for commu-

nity residences, according to Barbara Schubert of the state Developmental Disabilities Services Office (DDSO). That number has held steady for the past three years.

"Our group home development is very slow on Staten Island," she said. Group homes are operated by the state or voluntary agencies, which receive Medicaid reimbursements.

Residences range from those offering 24-hour supervision to supportive apartments with staff who check in only once or twice a week. They provide 666 permanent and respite-care beds at 67 sites for the retarded and others.

According to Robert Witkowsky, director of the Staten Island DDSO, 27 new beds will be added in 1989-90. Another 70 beds are possible in that period. And tentative proposals call for adding 130 beds in 1990-91.

"I'm assuming within the next two to three years, we hope to almost abolish the waiting list for Staten Island," said Witkowsky.

But politics and money play important roles in that scenario. Governor Mario Cuomo has called for a two-percent cut in all state agencies to help eliminate a projected \$277 million deficit in the cur-

rent budget, and the state could face a \$1 billion shortfall next fiscal year.

Sheer numbers aren't the only factor; different kinds of residences are needed, said Mrs. Braniff, who deals with handicapped services for the Board of Education.

"My daughter is physically disabled and retarded," she said. "The group homes that would be for the non-ambulatory population are very, very few." The closest she has found is in Brooklyn, and all its beds are full, she added.

Parents must share the blame for the lack of community beds today, according to Salinardi. When the Staten Island Developmental Center, which succeeded Willowbrook, closed down, many families did not request a community bed, skewing state planning.

"We weren't asking them to give up their sons and daughters at 10 or 12 years old, but now when they want to make provisions for their child to go into a residential care facility, it's not available," Salinardi said.

Those now waiting for group homes are typically in their late 30s or early 40s, according to Harold Friedland, associate director of Staten Island Aid, a voluntary agency serving the retarded.

Mrs. Braniff admits she has mixed emotions about her daughter Lynn, 22, moving out, not only because she may encounter problems away from home, but because the family will miss her. "Making that final cut is a very difficult time," Mrs. Braniff said.

Salinardi agreed that letting go can be harrow for families of the disabled. "The bond becomes overwhelming, because it's so intense to take care of their lives," he said.

Groups such as the Staten Island Retardation and Disabilities Council (SIRDC) offer counseling to help cope with that decision, as well as information on services available.

Mrs. Braniff is undeterred by the difficulties in finding her daughter a home away from home. "I think services for the disabled have expanded tremendously since the Willowbrook decree," she said.

There may not be an appropriate place for Lynn right now, but "that's going to be my new handwagon," Mrs. Braniff said.

(First of two parts. Tomorrow: When the mentally ill or physically disabled are on their own.)

Page 2 of 2