

Advocates for disabled list 'crucial' needs

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Advocates for the mentally retarded and developmentally disabled laid out a list of "crucial" needs at a legislative luncheon yesterday, even as elected officials warned that funding coffers have run dry.

About 100 people attended the Staten Island Retardation and Disabilities Council (SIRDC) luncheon, the group's largest meeting in recent history, according to its director, Dr. Gerald M. Spielman.

Spielman told the audience, gathered in the Columbian Lyceum, West Brighton, that requests for city and state funding face competition from "burning" issues such as homelessness, drug abuse, overcrowded prisons and the criminal justice system.

Spielman said he was informed yesterday that the city budget problems are

forcing a 2-percent cut in local assistance, with further cuts anticipated.

"It means the erosion of basic support systems that we have, and complete denial of any expansion," said Spielman.

"I don't recall a time when we found the city, state and federal coffers all in a sore state," said Borough President-elect Guy Molinari. The retiring Republican Congressman said he'd received an unexpected phone call from Gov. Mario Cuomo yesterday, asking him to be part of a bipartisan effort to draw more federal funds to New York.

Gov. Cuomo's office would neither confirm nor deny the call.

The state is looking at a \$500 million deficit by the end of this fiscal year, according to Assemblyman Eric Vitaliano, the only other elected official at the event. "The well is getting to be a bit dry," he said.

Citing a continuing economic turn-

down in the region, Vitaliano cautioned the group to be realistic in its expectations. "Things may get better, but that's certainly not this year," he said.

In an issues paper similar to ones presented at previous annual luncheons, the SIRDC called for increased support in six areas, the most pressing being transportation.

Better public and specialized transportation systems are needed, said Spielman, as well as training programs that would enable the retarded to use public transportation.

Currently, developmentally disabled Staten Islanders must travel to Manhattan or Brooklyn to make use of vocational evaluation programs and job training, another local need cited in the SIRDC list.

Respite services are needed for the Island's more than 55 homebound children and their families, said Spielman.

These are children with complex health conditions, such as those who use life-sustaining equipment.

"To our surprise, there were many, many more children like that on Staten Island than we believed," Spielman commented.

He renewed a call for more community residences to accommodate the approximately 190 people on waiting lists for group homes.

Robert Witkowsky, director of the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office (DDSO) said that by March, 1990, at least 83 more residential beds and three respite beds should be available.

The council would like to see progress in development of the Elizabeth A. Connelly Community Resource Center in Willowbrook. But Witkowsky said some planned features, such as a recreational

pool and a gym for the retarded, still lack funding.

Given the dire budget situations, the sixth item on the SIRDC's list seems to stand the best chance of success because it is the only one that requires no direct funding — the group wants legislation to formalize local input into state planning of programs for the retarded.

Despite the gloomy messages at the luncheon, Margaret Raustiala, who handles city and state budget issues for the city-wide Interagency Council of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Agencies, took a determined approach.

"We will ask for expansion money," she said. The city currently spends 60 cents per capita on every retarded and developmentally disabled citizen, according to Ms. Raustiala. "I think they can afford a bit more."