

# Group home dilemma leaves many

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## frustrated

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Whenever administrators decide to move him to a new room at the Brooklyn Developmental Center, Richard Montuori becomes frustrated and bangs his head against the wall.

It could be worse, and at one time it was. As a young boy, Richard, who is mentally retarded, spent a year in the former Willowbrook State School just before it was revealed in a series of articles by the Advance in the early 1970s that hundreds of retarded children there were being warehoused, neglected and treated little better than animals.

After its closing more than a decade later, the state of New York promised Richard's parents, Carmine and Mary, that their son would be able to live in a group home — an ordinary house in an ordinary neighborhood with nearly one-to-one care.

"He was 13 at the time (he left Willowbrook). He's 33 today and he's still in an institution," said Montuori, who lives with his wife in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn.

Group homes are seen as a humane and progressive solution by many who care for the mentally retarded. But difficulties in opening a group home have complicated efforts to place people like Richard.

There are more than 800 mentally retarded people either in a group home, care program or institution on Staten Island, or who are seeking placement here. Countless others live at home, sometimes seeking outside services.

Most of the former residents of Willowbrook, officially renamed the Staten Island Developmental Center, have been placed in group homes. Other patients, like Richard, are still in institutions, awaiting placement. And 84 residents are still on the grounds of the former facility, without a stable home.

Because they have two grown children living on Staten Island, the Montuoris were delighted to hear several months ago that Richard's name had finally been added to the waiting list for a group home here. When the parents are no longer able, Richard's siblings can visit him in his new home.

More than anything else, Richard needs a place where he can get consistent, personalized care.

### Regulations delay homes

New York State says it has taken so long to set up and fill group homes because of tight regulations, designed to ensure safe environments and prevent throwbacks to the days of Willowbrook. The homes typically have 8 to 10 residents.

Parents of retarded children have their own ideas



ADVANCE PHOTO/MIKE FALCO

Vincent and Annette Rooney and their son James, who must wear a helmet to protect his head from injury when he has a seizure.

about the delays.

"I think the biggest problem is the support from the community," said Mrs. Montuori. "People do have to be educated about the way these people are."

Mrs. Montuori was referring to a chronic fear of group homes among potential neighbors. Whenever a new site is announced, often at a community board meeting, invariably the battle cry goes up. Although the resulting controversy rarely delays a siting for long, the state must take a community's opposition into account.

"It complicates the process," said Barbara Schubert, information exchange coordinator for the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Office (DDSO).

"They'll never get rid of institutions unless people get rid of this (fear)," Montuori said. Residents of neighborhoods that protest the placement of group homes nearby cite the horrors of Willowbrook to justify their fear, instead of realizing those horrors are exactly why group homes are so necessary, he said. "People have forgotten about that now."