

# Placement of group homes: 'It's like being back in 1973'

Susan Bear, executive director of Mount Loretto, anticipates opposition if she has to site the group home for the mentally retarded in a neighborhood.

The major objection raised by homeowners is that a group home's presence will lower property values in a neighborhood. Such a result has never occurred on Staten Island, Witkowsky said, and independent studies over the years have born out the same conclusion nationally.

What encourages him is that once a group home is operating, "the opposition dwindles and the acceptance factor comes into play."

A group home that is scheduled to open shortly on Hope Avenue, Fort Wadsworth, initially drew resistance, "but now they see how nice it is, and that local residents are being hired to work there," Witkowsky said.

Unfortunately, because of responses similar to that which Monsignor Servodidio received on his answering machine, people who have come to be supporters of a group home in their own neighborhood often are reluctant to speak out when opposition arises elsewhere.

Even though there are programs to educate public school students about the needs of the developmentally disabled, "we still have to educate their parents," Mrs. Shields said. The borough office serves the developmentally disabled with mental retardation, cerebral palsy, autism, epilepsy and/or neurological impairments. Currently, there are about 180 developmentally disabled Staten Islanders requiring some type of residential placement in the next two to three years. Additionally, 50 to 60 Executive Way residents will have to move into less restrictive settings in the community in accordance with the Willowbrook Consent Decree.

Witkowsky's office is moving forward with plans to open several more group homes on Staten Island in the coming year. "Some neighborhoods have shown a very clear understanding, but most are generally resistant," Mrs. Shields said. "We started siting in 1973 and '74, and I don't believe the opposition has changed that much. There are still the same issues and the same fear. It's like being back in 1973."

The Padavan law also calls for the group home's compliance with all local ordinances. "We have never had any complaints against the residents," Mrs. Shields said. Occasionally, the office receives a complaint that a lawn should be better kept or that there is a problem with parking, and those issues are addressed.

Each group home is obligated to have an advisory committee that neighborhood residents are invited to join, Witkowsky said. "We want people to go into the homes and see what's going on," he said.

Under the local direction of the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office, OMRDD currently sponsors 46 group homes for the developmentally disabled: 14 in Community Board 1 that serve 95 people; 23 in Board 2 that serve 121, and nine in Board 3 that serve 95. OMRDD contracts with about 10 different agencies to run the group homes.

A dozen of the group homes in Board 2 are located on Executive Way, part of the former Willowbrook grounds. There remains debate over whether those homes are in truth "community based," but Witkowsky said the families of the residents are happy with the setting.

However, he noted that OMRDD would prefer the Mission of the Immaculate Virgin, Mount Loretto, not open a group home on its Pleasant Plains campus. Because there are other campus residences serving the developmentally disabled, Mount Loretto could be accused of becoming "a mini-Willowbrook," he said.



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ABOUT STATEN ISLAND

the retarded were gaining acceptance, perhaps because communities became more concerned about fighting other social service facilities for recovering drug addicts, the mentally ill and homeless.

The apparent gains in community acceptance probably had more to do with 1978 legislation known as the Padavan law, which structured the means for community input and guaranteed localities the right to suggest alternative sites. (The Padavan law also applies to community residences for the mentally ill, which are established by the state Office of Mental Health.)

The community has the right to object to the placement of the group home on the basis that the neighborhood would be saturated with state-licensed community residences to the point of substantially altering the character of the neighborhood.

The commissioner of the state Office of Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) or an appointed hearing officer acts as the final arbiter if the local governing body cannot come to an agreement on the site with the sponsors of the group home. The resulting decision is subject to judicial review, only on specific grounds.

Since the Padavan law took effect, only two group homes have not received community board approval, and neither case went beyond the commissioner's hearing, said Kathy Kennedy Shields, planning coordinator for the city regional office of OMRDD.

group home planned to open on Westferleigh's Galloway Avenue for 10 retarded people. Monsignor John Servodidio, pastor of St. Joseph's R.C. Church in Rosebank, gave testimony supporting the group home Dec. 11 at a Community Board 1 meeting. The next night he came home to the message, followed by a number of hang-up phone calls.

The caller on the answering machine said he's been a practicing Catholic for 55 years. Monsignor Servodidio figures the man "heard the scriptures read about 3,000 times, and obviously not one word sunk through."

For all the efforts made in the past 15 years at educating the public about mental retardation, still today, "we've been getting opposition on almost every (group) home," said Robert Witkowsky, Staten Island Developmental Services director.

"When people hear 'retarded' or 'developmentally disabled,' they think we're bringing in people who will be a menace or a danger," he said.

When the horrors of the former Willowbrook State School for the retarded were exposed in the early 1970s, public outcry over the inhumane conditions became vehement. A suit on behalf of the school's residents led to the Willowbrook Consent Decree, a court order signed by then-Gov. Hugh Carey in 1975, which mandated the state to find "community placements" for some 5,000 retarded people by 1992.

When those community placements started taking the form of group homes opening on neighborhood streets, local opposition rang as fiercely as the denunciations of Willowbrook had. Residents went as far as firebombing some proposed sites.

During the 1980s, it appeared that group homes for

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