

Budget cuts a disaster for families of disabled

Page 2 of 3

By PATRICK JOYCE
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Many New Yorkers will suffer the effects of severe cuts proposed in the state budget, but perhaps those who will suffer the most are the families of the mentally disabled.

Non-profit agencies on Staten Island received about \$1.3 million last year to provide relief service to such families. Officials from the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) say this aid prevents families from falling apart under the strains of caring for a loved one who is disabled.

The OMRDD has been able to scrape together funds from other sources, according to the office's spokesman, Ronald Byrne. But even with that aid, more than a third of last year's Island total has simply disappeared, and earlier than care providers expected. Roughly translated, about a third of the 1,225 Island families served could be affected, Byrne said.

"I understand there's a flurry of outrage across the state," said Genevieve Benoit, executive director of the non-profit agency A Very Special Place, angry herself after discovering the nature of the cuts recently.

She said she was shocked to learn that last year's \$400,000 for her group's Telluride program, which transports more than 200 disabled people to special programs, was to be cut by nearly two-thirds.

The outrage may have pro-

voked the desired reactions in Albany, however. In the last weeks, speculation has grown that lawmakers will restore funding to family support programs.

"I've been hearing rumors that are very optimistic," Ms. Benoit said.

Concern over funding began to mount in late February, when the state notified care providers that their funding contracts would be terminated on March 31, instead of June 30. Last year the state provided \$28 million for family support; this year, the total, reflected in new contracts that took effect a week ago, will be \$14 million.

Particularly disappointing about the cuts, Ms. Benoit said, is that they threaten to disrupt a long-term plan of weaning the state's mental health care system away from large institutions, a process that began in earnest with the dismantling of Willowbrook State School.

"It's a step backward in the whole service system," Ms. Benoit said. By generously supporting families in their efforts to care for the disabled, the state can make institutions unnecessary, she said.

Byrne acknowledged that family support programs will feel cuts of "a larger proportion than the rest of the system as a whole." But he disputed the claim that the policy is inequitable.

"It's not fair to say that family support services (funding) is being hurt and no one else is," he said.