

Bridging the group home gap

Agencies pressed to communicate better

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At a recent public hearing on a group home for the mentally retarded in Westerleigh, one woman said she was afraid the residents would roam the streets and kill her. Other residents complained the home, located on South Greenleaf Avenue, was overpriced, would decrease their property value and would destroy the character of the neighborhood.

While most of the residents' questions and concerns may be legitimate, community board leaders and the directors of social service agencies agree better communications between the agencies and the communities would help answer many questions and dispel rumors about the mentally retarded.

Mention the words "group homes" and residents shudder over the unknown, politicians groan about the implications of placement and Joe Carroll, Community Board 1 district manager, rubs his forehead in frustration.

"They don't try to bring outreach programs to the community," Carroll said about the agencies, as his right hand worked at his forehead. "They haven't done anything to educate the public as to what services they propose. They really have an obligation to let people know, to communicate."

Kathy Kennedy Shields, coordinator of resi-

dential development for Staten Island Developmental Disability Services Office (DDSO), said she asks most agencies that propose group homes to meet with future neighbors, either through community meetings or door-to-door visits. Some agencies are cooperative, she said, while others are not.

"We still have a long way to go," she said about building a stronger line of communications.

Her agency, the funding source for many group homes for the mentally retarded, currently has two programs in the school system that attempt to familiarize and educate students about a variety of disabilities. "The Kids Project" travels to elementary schools throughout the city. It uses marionettes and puppets, depicting, among other disabilities, the blind and physically disabled. "Main Street" is a similar program but aimed at high school students. DDSO also has hiring programs for high school seniors and juniors.

"But we have been a bit remiss in educating adults," Robert Witkowsky, director of DDSO, said.

The next step, Ms. Kennedy Shields said, is reaching the adults — those who own homes, raise children and have the most questions about group homes for the mentally handicapped.

In October, the executive council of Staten

Island Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Council, a group that works closely with DDSO in monitoring group homes, will review guidelines for an educational program proposed by the newly formed Adhoc Residents Committee for the Community.

Still in its developmental stages, the committee will try to bring the agencies proposing sites to area committee and civic association meetings, said Gene Spatz, the director of the program.

"Basically, we're trying to come up with a better process," he said, referring to the lack of consistent meetings between the agencies and residents. "We'd like to see the agencies do more groundwork before a facility is built in the area."

After an agency chooses a site and conducts a feasibility study on the property, the committee and agency will contact the community board, discuss the project and arrange to meet with neighbors of the proposed site.

"We want to tell the community who we are and what's going on," said Spatz, who also is executive director of On Your Mark, an agency that provides services to people with special needs. It also operates group homes on Brighton Avenue, New Brighton, and on DeKay Street, West Brighton.

"The problem is, there are so many misconceptions. What we're trying to do is give accurate information," Spatz said. "The agencies aren't doing enough. There should be more guidelines set up, so the community knows more about us and we know more about the community."