

# Islanders fuming over siting of group homes

## Anger obscures city-state distinctions

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Staten Island's anger over the city's plan to erect two homeless shelters here has spilled over to include community-based group homes for the developmentally disabled.

At a recent hearing concerning siting for three group homes in Community Board 3, inflamed residents blasted the board and Mayor David N. Dinkins, charging that the borough is turning into "a dumping ground" for the problems of New York City.

Residents of the three targeted

neighborhoods repeatedly linked state-operated group homes and city homeless shelters. "What's the difference between the homeless and the mentally retarded? We're talking about hiding a city problem," one woman yelled.

State officials acknowledged the confusion and said they understand the residents' concerns. "It's bad timing," said Thomas Tierney, deputy director of administration at the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Service Office (SIDDSO).

But bad timing does not diminish SIDDSO's responsibility to

provide homes for the mentally retarded, under laws that responded to the outcry raised over conditions at large-scale institutions like the former Willowbrook State School, officials noted.

### 20 new homes planned

SIDDSO was created to operate such homes and oversee those run by private agencies. The agency has plans to open or sponsor 20 homes in Community Boards 2 and 3 by the end of 1992 and to continue to open four or five each succeeding year across the Island, Tierney said.

Plans for the first 20 homes — 10 in each board area — are in

(See HOMES, Page A 8)



The house under construction on Faber Street in Port Richmond is being targeted as a group home for the retarded

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*page 1 of 2*

(From Page A 1)

various stages of development. While some sites are still being narrowed down, others, including the three discussed at Board 3, already have been chosen and presented to the community. Each site will have its own public hearing at the appropriate community board before it can open, officials said.

Most of the 200 persons expected to live in the 20 homes already live on Staten Island, either in other state-run houses or with their families, according to Robert Witkowsky, director of SIDDSO.

Witkowsky said approximately 65 of those 200 are former residents of Willowbrook, known as "class members," who currently live in group homes on Executive

Way, a street on the eastern side of the grounds of the former institution.

"Because Executive Way is on the grounds of the old Willowbrook," Tierney explained, "the judge doesn't feel that is a true community." To meet the requirements of the Willowbrook Consent Decree, a federal judge has said these class members must move off the institution's grounds.

The number of people who will move is not precise, Witkowsky said, because either the class members or their legal guardians will be given a choice about staying on Executive Way or moving.

Another group to be included in the 200 are 12 or 14 people who are currently supervised by the city Board of Education, but will soon be over age 18. Most are currently

enrolled in boarding schools off Staten Island, but their families live here, Witkowsky said.

### Most living with families

The majority of the rest — about 112 people — will be taken from the Staten Island waiting list for group homes, Witkowsky said.

The people on this list, which stands at about 250, are currently living with their families in the community, according to Kathy Kennedy-Shields, director of planning and development for SIDDSO.

The remaining candidates for the new group homes will come from two sources. About six people are currently living in city facilities operated by the Health and Hospitals Corp. or the Child Welfare Agency. Witkowsky said they are all Staten Islanders or

Page 2 of 2

relatives of Staten Islanders who cannot be cared for by their families.

He added that the only non-Islanders who might enter some of the new homes are a maximum of 10 people who live in the Manhattan Developmental Center, which is slated to close at the end of next year.

Witkowsky said Staten Island has been asked to open 10 beds to Manhattan Center residents if their parents or family members want them to move here. So far, only five have accepted Staten Island placement, he said.

In return for accepting these clients, Witkowsky said, funding for two more sites will be provided by the state.

### Any open beds for community

If the remaining five families refuse, then those beds will go to

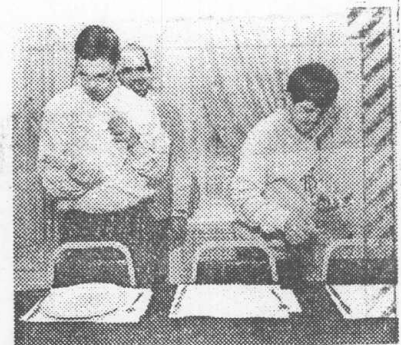
Islanders on the waiting list, Witkowsky said. The same applies to beds refused by people who choose to stay on Executive Way.

In addition, the vacated beds on Executive Way will be opened for Island community residents who would like to live there.

SIDDSO officials said they are hoping that Staten Island homeowners will become less fearful and more accepting as they learn who will be living in the group homes slated for their neighborhoods.

When communities have complaints, Tierney said, the state wants to hear them and address them.

"As far as the boards are concerned, when they have legitimate issues and concerns, we deal with them," he said. But the intolerant attitude expressed at many meetings cannot be dealt with, he



## Group home dilemma

added.

First in a series. Tomorrow: With 20 new group homes for the developmentally disabled slated to open on Staten Island by the end of 1992, the state and private agencies that will run them must be prepared for fierce battles from communities chosen for siting.