

# Agencies know they're in for fight on every siting proposal they make

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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.

That was the case in September when the Independent Living Association, a Brooklyn-based agency that already operates one home on the Island, approached Community Board 2 about opening a home in South Beach.

The board voted against the request, saying the area is already saturated with social service facilities.

The state commissioner of the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities ruled Oct. 25 that the area is not saturated, and the agency is continuing with plans to build the home.

At a recent hearing at Community Board 3, homeowners' protests against three homes proposed for the South Shore combined with fear and anger over the city's plans to build two homeless shelters on Staten Island.

Residents also demonstrated

vince communities to accept group homes, and if necessary, must fight for the rights of their clients when they site these homes.

John Welch, executive director of the Independent Living Association, said that residents don't always realize that an agency studies a neighborhood in great detail before attempting to site a home there.

"I spend hours, weeks and days studying a community," Welch said. In the case of the South Beach site opposed by Board 2, that translated to seven months of work, he said.

Among the important requirements are such logistical concerns as pedestrian and vehicular traffic, convenience to transportation and shopping.

Welch also looks at the character of a neighborhood. "We recognize that each community represents its own ambience," he said.

"We choose a neighborhood the same way any other family would who wants to insure the well-being and the potential growth of their family," Welch said. He noted that few people realize that a group home is intended to be a permanent home for the residents placed there.

Kathy Kennedy-Shields, director of planning and development for the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office (SIDDSO), an arm of the OMRDD, said that misconception presents one of the most difficult issues in siting a home.

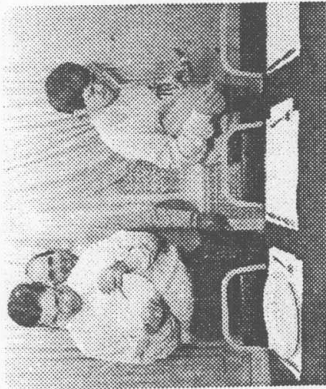
"The community looks at a group home as a facility as opposed to a home, but in terms of our philosophy, these are people who will be moving into a community for the rest of their lives," she explained.

"It's up to us to tell them who we are so that they can understand exactly what we do," said Thomas McAlvanah, director of residential services for the Association for Children with Retarded Mental Development, which currently operates three homes on Staten Island. "We're not trying to disrupt anything. We're trying to integrate people with disabilities."

To fight neighborhood fears, agencies have developed several tactics that revolve around educating people about retardation and group homes.

Welch, of Independent Living, said he likes to invite prospective

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## Group home Dilemma

marked intolerance toward disabled people. "Why must my children have to see these people? Put them in Mariners Harbor near the Procter and Gamble plant," yelled one man.

Complaints such as these, as well as fears that property values will decrease, that the neighborhood is dangerous for retarded people, or that residents of the home will cause problems in the community, are also common.

Together with the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD), agencies must be prepared to con-