

# 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.

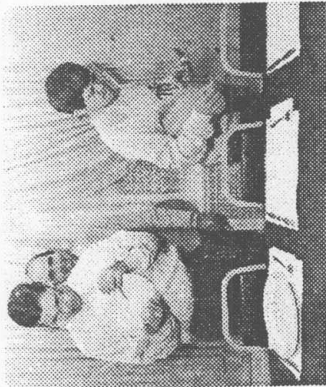
"The community looks at a group home as a facility as opposed to a home, but in terms of our philosophy, these are people who will be moving into a community for the rest of their lives," she explained.

"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-

neighbors to visit a group home in another area.

"What I try to do is give people a sense of what it truly is going to be like with a group home as a neighbor," he said. Independent Living has taken neighborhood residents to visit two group homes.

"It was self-reinforcing," Welch said. Everyone looked around the group homes, met the people who live in them and got an accurate idea of what the home in their neighborhood would be like. Furthermore, Welch said, each person who visited the home realized that at some point in their lives, they had met or known a retarded person.

The Association for the Advancement of the Blind and Retarded, which operates a group home on Cromwell Avenue in Dongan Hills, also likes to bring future neighbors in contact with existing homes.

Residents who live near group homes can offer another source of support, said Chris Weldon, executive director of the Association for the Advancement of the Blind and Retarded. They are the best people, he said, to convince other communities that a group home can be a good neighbor. In the past, he has invited current neighbors to attend public hearings or to talk to prospective neighbors.

"Our biggest selling point is that we really try to do a good job," Weldon said.

Agencies also point out that group homes offer communities a chance for input they wouldn't have with so-called "normal" neighbors.

Welch said that when he is preparing a new home, he contacts neighbors to ask about the exterior decoration and landscaping, so that the home fits into the neighborhood. And he points out that unlike a private home, a group home offers neighbors outlets for complaints.

If the neighbors contact the agency operating the home and receive no relief, they can contact OMRDD or local representatives, officials said, for help solving their problems. "You don't have that opportunity if you have somebody else living there," Welch said.

Getting involved with civic organizations is another way to make contact with the community, said Margaret DelBagno, borough director for the Association for the Help of Retarded Children, which operates several homes on the Island, including its newest on Galloway Avenue, Port Richmond Center.

"I make a point of joining the civic associations so that we are a part of the area and people do know us," she said.

Ms. Kennedy-Shields or other staff members from SIDDSO appear at public hearings armed with statistics from across the country to counter other fears, such as falling property values, increased crime and deteriorating quality of life.

Overall, agencies report that once a group home opens, neighbors have few problems, even if they fought the home at the beginning. Residents near the Cromwell Avenue home took the agency to court to try to prevent the home from opening. The agency won the lawsuit and opened the home about 10 years ago.

They haven't had a problem since, John Hukle, the manager of the home, said the neighbors have come to accept it as part of the community and treat the residents as such. A survey of neighbors on the block confirmed that statement.

Doris Taylor, a counselor at the house since it opened, said all of the neighbors are now friendly. "It really has changed a lot, believe me," she said.

*Second in a series. Tomorrow: When Project Hope in Fort Wadsworth was first proposed, one resident had his doubts. Now, though, he has no complaints.*

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