

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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