

"There are plenty of retarded individuals that are higher functioning that can stay in the community, in parents' homes or with other family members. There are even higher functioning ones living in apartment settings," she said. But for her 36-year-old son, the only alternative to an institutional setting is a group home.

As parents grow older, they worry about providing care for their children after they die. That is one of the reasons Richard Montuori will soon be moving into a group home in Brooklyn.

"We as parents are looking for something or someplace where we know he is going to be taken care of," said his mother, Mary Montuori.

"There's going to be a time when he is going to outlive us," Richard's father, Carmine, added.

"Our other children are married and have their own children and in that way, they're settled," Mrs. Montuori said. "We'd like to know that Richard is settled, too."

Richard, 33, lived in the former Willowbrook State School for about two years before that infamous institution closed. Although the agreement between the state and the families of Willowbrook residents said the residents would all move to group homes, there are some like Richard still living in large institutions like the Brooklyn Developmental Center.

The Montuoris said they were hoping Richard would be placed in a Staten Island group home so that he would be near his brother and sister, who live in South Beach and Huguenot, respectively. But since an opening in a Brooklyn house has become available, the couple has decided to let Richard try that.

"We wanted to make sure he had a place," Montuori said.

Parents know that group homes cannot provide the same sort of living conditions their children would have if they never moved away. "You're never going to find the best, but you can do the best you can," Mrs. Panzella said.

"It's not like home," Ms. Coull agreed. But she pointed out that if Eric weren't handicapped, the living conditions he might experience at age 21 would probably be less than what she would provide anyway. "It would be much worse if he were 21 and living with a bunch of the guys."

Having their children live in group homes does not mean that parents no longer have responsibility for them. "You're not giving up your job as a parent," Ms. Coull said.

Mrs. Panzella said parents have to be aware of what is going on at the home where their child lives, to make sure he gets the best care possible. Even in the best homes, problems arise, and parents have to advocate for their children.

One of the most recurrent problems is staffing. Mrs. Panzella said the people who work in group homes are often not as attentive as she would like them to be. She said parents often complain of staff members sleeping or watching television instead of interacting with the residents.

The mother who asked not to be identified said a high ratio of residents to staff members can also lead to more personal issues, like whether or not personal hygiene is maintained.

If there are supposed to be three staff members at the group home and there are only two on any given day, it makes a big difference to the 10 or 12 residents, she pointed out. "Then the child is likely not to be as clean as they would have been," she said.

But Ms. Coull said she feels her son has to learn to care for himself as much as possible. And she pointed out, in the group home there are adult males who can

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