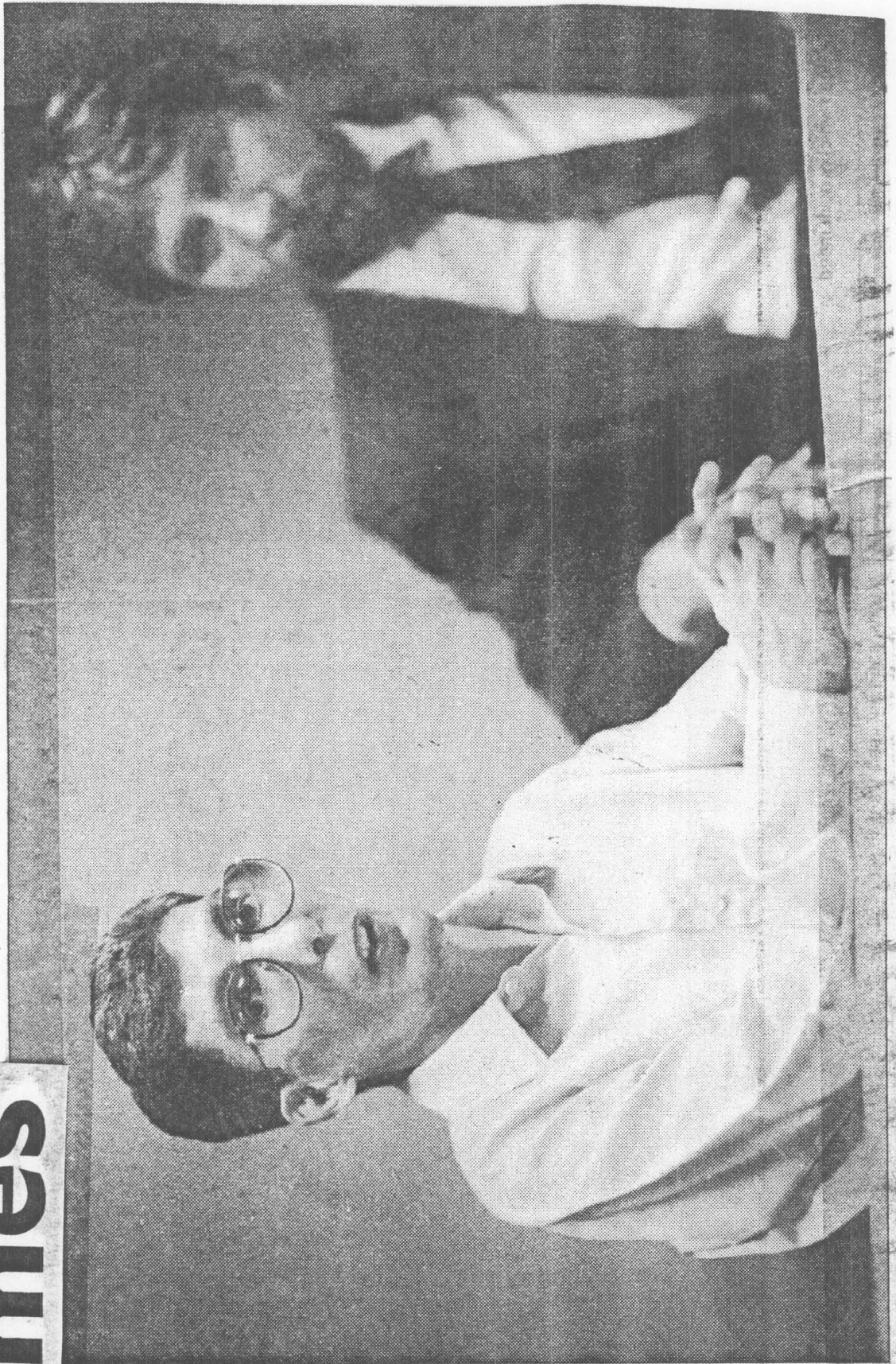


# Group homes

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Joe Lucerino, left, president of the On Your Mark self advocacy group, makes a point as Eugene Spatz, On Your Mark's executive director, looks

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## Advocates hope to alleviate fears in the community through education

By EILEEN AJ CONNELLY  
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Time after time, crowds of angry homeowners have jammed community board meeting rooms to protest proposals for group homes for the developmentally disabled.

After repeatedly listening to the same fears and unfounded ac-

cusations, the agencies which operate these homes finally realized what they had been doing wrong.

"A lot of the backlash was because of people not knowing what these homes are and who lives there," said Laura Kennedy, the chairwoman of the Association for the Help of Retarded Children Staten Island parent group. To

combat the backlash, advocates of group homes have formed the Staten Island Community Education and Outreach Task Force.

Mrs. Kennedy, a member of the task force, said at an Advance Editorial Board meeting that their goal is to alleviate fear through education.

"I have a difficult time when I go to these meetings and I hear people saying the retarded are going to rape the old ladies and molest little children," said Monsignor John Servodidio, pastor of

St. Joseph's R.C. Church, Rosebank, and a staunch advocate of group homes.

Monsignor Servodidio believes the procedures the agencies are required to follow for siting group homes are wrong, and possibly unconstitutional. "If everyone who bought or rented a house had to go before the community board, then it would be justified," he said.

State law requires that the local government be notified in advance. The state office which oversees the siting of group homes by non-profit agencies decided that the best way to meet this notification mandate in New York City — and at the same time, open a dialogue with the affected neighborhood — is through the community boards.

In the past, "We felt we were being remiss in telling community boards what we were really about and what a community residence is," said Robert Witkowsky, director of the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office (SIDDSO), the local arm of the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.

On Your Mark, a West Brighton agency that operates several group homes for Islanders, recently tried a new tactic to win over skeptical area residents.

The agency wants to open a new group home for 10 developmentally disabled young adults in South Beach. Although On Your Mark does not yet own the McClean Avenue building it has targeted for the group home, the agency embarked on a major community outreach campaign.

Eugene Spatz, the executive director of On Your Mark, said the agency contacted Community Board 2 members, civic associations and the pastor of one of the local churches. Agency employees also went door-to-door on the block, offering information and asking prospective neighbors if

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# The Padavan Law

Some of the dissatisfaction about group home siting stems from the Padavan Law, which provides for the placement of group homes in residential areas.

The law allows community boards to serve in an advisory capacity by approving or rejecting a group home site. The board's decision is not binding on the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, which has the final say and approved five of the seven sites the board disapproved.

The board can reject a site if there are too many similar facilities in a neighborhood. If residents of the area are opposed to the home, the board has the option of selecting an alternate site. However, all three community boards are on record as saying they will not pick alternate sites for any type of project.

they had any questions.

In addition, a letter explaining the agency's work in general, the proposal for the group home and who would be living there was distributed throughout the neighborhood and printed in the church bulletin. The letter also issued an invitation for concerned homeowners to visit one of the other group homes On Your Mark operates.

## Approach was successful

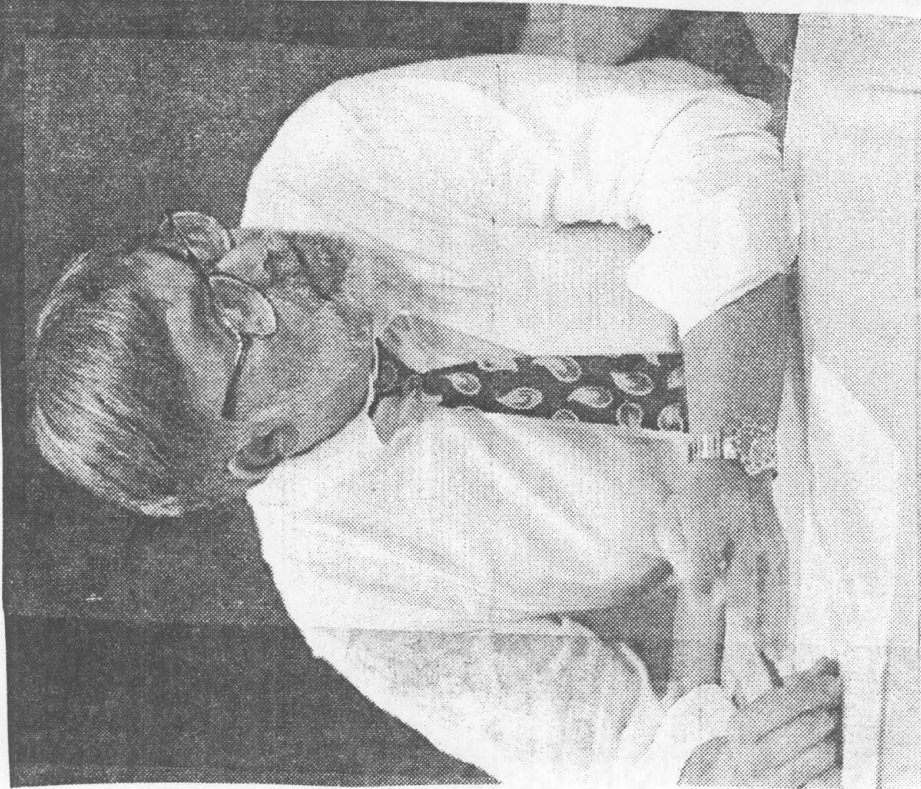
The approach was successful. Community Board 2 unanimously passed the proposal for the On Your Mark home, as well as proposals for two other group homes, several weeks ago.

Witkowsky said that was the first time three group home proposals on Staten Island have been unanimously accepted on the same night.

The task force is not limiting itself to educating only the neighborhoods where community residences will be established.

Thomas Tierney, SIDDSO deputy director for administration, said the plan is to also contact fraternal organizations, civic groups, "anybody who will listen," and present videos and speakers who can teach people what community residences are about. "We'll be letting the public in general know a little more about us," he said.

Witkowsky added, "If we continue education, eventually siting a group home won't be that important to a community anymore."



Witkowsky stresses a point during the meeting.

## Education is the key

Monsignor Servodidio agreed that education will go a long way.

"The community looks at retarded individuals as invaders of their communities who are going to disrupt neighborhoods and lower property values," he said.

Witkowsky said those fears have been proven wrong. Currently, there are about 80 residential programs on the Island, serving about 800 developmentally disabled people. None of the existing programs has had any problems once they were established, no matter what kind of neighborhood opposition initially greeted them, he said. One of the major concerns is that property values would decrease once the home was open. "In 90 percent of the cases, it helps raise the property

values," Witkowsky said.

Witkowsky said sites for new homes are not chosen methodically, but are picked by examining homes and lots for sale, and deciding if they meet the criteria for a group home. "We don't look in areas and say, 'This is not an area we want to live in,'" Witkowsky said, noting that there are group homes in almost every type of community on the Island. The state and the agencies look at the features in a neighborhood, such as stores, access to public transportation, the need for renovations and price.

## Working with others

To combat concerns about oversaturating any particular area, SIDDSO is working with Borough Hall and the community boards when choosing sites, he



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ADVANCE PHOTOS/STEVE ZAFFARANO

Linda Coull of Graniteville answers a question at an Advance Editorial Board meeting as Robert Witkowsky, right, director of the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office (SIDDSO), listens.

added.

"Oversaturation" of group homes for developmentally disabled people is not defined by law. The Padavan Law, on the other hand, says a community may reject a home site only if it would change the character of the community, Ms. Kennedy Shields said. Numerous homes that community boards have voted against in the past year have been approved by the state because the boards could not prove that level of impact, she said.

Kathy Kennedy-Shields, SIDDSO director of planning and development for community residences, said the state and private agencies pay careful attention to details, such as the architectural themes in communities so that group homes blend in the neighborhood.

### Says more are needed

Although there have been a number of community residences approved and opened on the Island in the past year, Witkowsky said more are needed. Of the 250 Staten Islanders registered with the SIDDSO for group home placement, at least 150 need a

place right now, he said.

Spatz said the role of group homes in the lives of developmentally disabled people and their families is changing. "It's not a last resort anymore," he said.

"The stereotype is that a parent waits until the individual is a burden and the parent can't care for him anymore," Spatz said. But the generation of developmentally disabled people who are now entering adulthood see community residences more in the way other people see leaving their parents' home and going away to college, he said.

Eric Coull moved into a community residence when he was 19 years old. "These kids want to leave home," said his mother, Linda Coull. "Mom is not the best person in the world for a young man to live with."

Special education schools like the Hungerford School in Clifton stress placement in a community residence as a positive step, Ms. Coull added. "All through school, they're saying independence," she said.

Those positive steps can be achieved in an even more inde-

pendent setting, such as a supportive apartment. Developmentally disabled people living in a group home who have learned the necessary daily living skills and need only a small amount of guidance or assistance are likely candidates.

Joe Lucerino, 33, an On Your Mark client who lives in a supportive apartment, said it offers him and his roommate the right balance of independence and help. "We shop, we cook, we do our laundry, just like everybody else," he said. Living independently has also allowed Lucerino to expand his social life. "I'm never home," he added.

The Advance Editorial Board for this meeting consisted of Brian J. Laline, Editor; Editorial Page Editor Mark Hanley; City Editor Thomas Checchi; Assistant City Editor Ken Paulsen; copy editor Michael Dominowski; and reporter Eileen AJ Connelly.)

For a look at a day in the life of a group home, see tomorrow's Advance.