

Advocates hope to alleviate fears in the community through education

By EILEEN AJ CONNELLY
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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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