

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

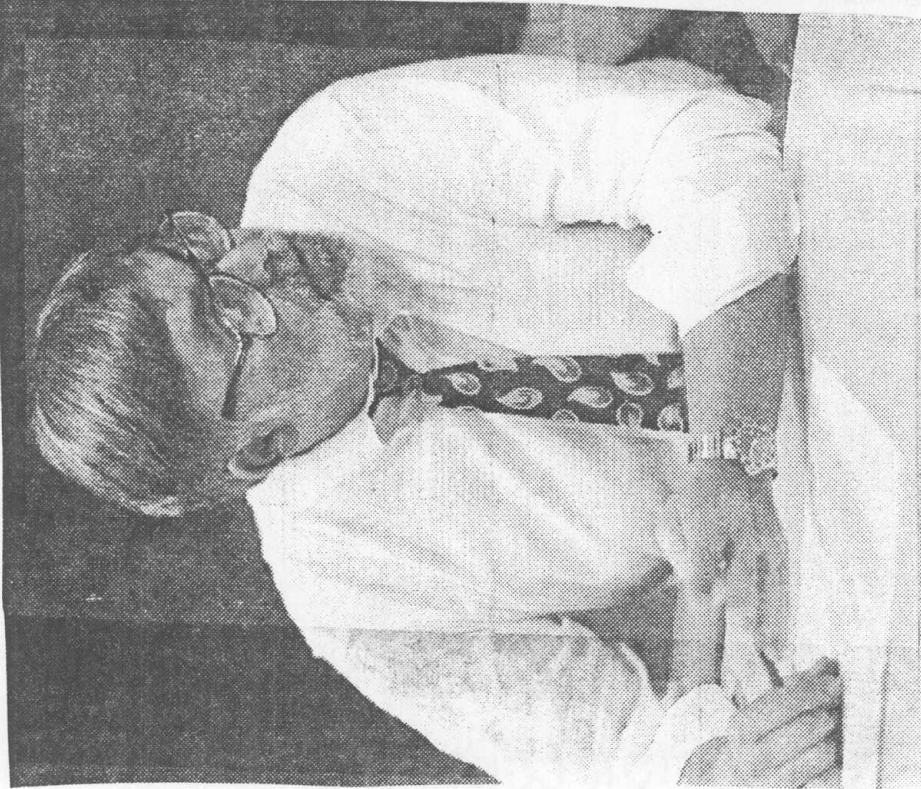
The approach was successful. Community Board 2 unanimously passed the proposal for the On Your Mark home, as well as proposals for two other group homes, several weeks ago.

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