

When it's independence day, Fran Hughes is sad

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The progress that the residents make in the group homes Fran Hughes manages is the source of both pride and sadness. "When I see the progress that they make, it makes me feel that our job is working," she explained. But on the other hand, the progress among the developmentally disabled adults she works with often means they can move to a place with less supervision, and their parting is sad.

"We lost some of our good clients that way," she said. "They've learned what they can in this house."

The double houses on Thornycroft Avenue in Eltingville, run by Staten Island Aid, are home for 16 men and women who are developmentally disabled. As manager of the residences, Mrs. Hughes, 37, is responsible for coordinating the daily activities of the residents and the 35-member staff.

This building is unique in that it is actually a duplex containing two homes, each with four men and four women living in them. On one side, the residents are high-functioning adults who can speak and take part in a great deal of their own care. On the other side the residents are more severely retarded who have less ability to communicate; some of them are blind.

Unpredictable and hectic

Mrs. Hughes never knows what a day will bring. "I write down every day the things I have to do," she said. "Some days I don't get three of those things done."

On a "calm" day, Mrs. Hughes arrives at the house from her Stapleton home sometime between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m. Often, even before she is finished getting her own three children ready for their day, she gets a call from the residence.

One recent day, a client had to be taken to the emergency room after injuring herself, and two staff members had to accompany her. Mrs. Hughes arranged for other staff members to get other clients to day treatment programs and workshops, doctor's appointments and therapy sessions, and still had staff members at the house to keep it running.

Another morning, Mrs. Hughes was in early because one of the house vehicles broke down, and she had to "borrow" another from the main office and coordinate its use so that everyone could meet their obligations.

The kitchen staff had grocery shopping to do — they go shopping about twice a week, returning with dozens of parcels that need to be carried in and sorted between the two sections. Clients again had various appointments to keep and programs to attend. And Mrs. Hughes had to stop at the Staten Island Aid administrative office to drop off paperwork and pick up mail.

On the job

It rarely gets quiet

Fortunately, Mrs. Hughes said she thrives on what another person might see as chaos. "If it gets too quiet, I find things to do," she said.

It rarely gets too quiet. When she returns from an errand, such as doing the clients' banking or taking one to the store to go clothes shopping, there are usually a list of things waiting for her attention.

And each client, as they return from their daily activities, has a list of things to talk about. "During the day, everyone wants my ear," she said.

Born on the Island of St. Kitts in the Caribbean, Mrs. Hughes moved to Brooklyn as a teen-ager and to Staten Island as a young woman. She was first exposed to Staten Island Aid group homes when visiting a relative of her husband's. "Seeing her in the house, I was very impressed with the kind of care she was getting," she said.

Six months later, Staten Island Aid opened a six-bed residence on Page Avenue in Tottenville, and Mrs. Hughes went for an interview. That was 12 years ago.

She was hired as a substitute for when staff members were ill or on vacation and soon started working as an overnight care worker. While the residents slept, she prepared lunches for the next day, did laundry, prepared breakfast and got everyone off to their daily activities.

She then moved to the day shift and was later promoted to the manager of that home.

Mrs. Hughes transferred to another agency home, an eight-bed house on Woodrow Road.

After spending a year as the manager of the 10-bed Staten Island Aid home on Sharrott Avenue, Pleasant Plains, Mrs. Hughes moved to Thornycroft Avenue in May 1991.

'They let you know what they need'

Through her work at the various houses, she has grown to understand her role in helping developmentally disabled people. For those who are able to make their own decisions, the staff is often there only as a guide, she said. But the residents who function at a lower level need more help.

"You really have to think for them," she said. "But they also let you know what they need."

"When I see the progress that they make, it makes me feel that our job is working," she said. "It makes me feel good, because they can learn."

Mrs. Hughes said her work has become more challenging with each assignment, in part because she has moved to bigger and bigger houses. "After a while, some of the smaller houses almost run themselves," she said. "They don't really need you."
"I guess I need to be needed."

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