

Group home opens in Great Kills

Organizers seek community's trust

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A new group home for 10 developmentally disabled adults in Great Kills opened its doors yesterday, offering tours of the renovated house, a buffet featuring roast ham and turkey, and a benediction.

The home at 40 Nash Ct., along with group homes proposed for Annadale and Tottenville, had been opposed by Community Board 3 and was the subject of community protest at a public hearing last year.

Some Islanders complained that the mentally retarded residents would "destroy" the borough. But organizers of yesterday's "open house" hoped to reverse that perception.

"We know a lot of neighbors weren't fully accepting, but maybe that will change," said Bonnie Krause, a staff social worker. "The protests were mostly out of fear. When they get to know some of the girls, maybe it will ease the fears."

The home is one of 33 similar facilities run by the state through the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office. Nine

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ADVANCE PHOTO/ROB SOLLETT

From the left, staff members Michelle November, Felecia Gordon and Mercedes Cortez and social worker Bonnie Krause talk in the new group home at 40 Nash Ct.

residents have moved into the house so far, all of whom previously shared a residence at 425 Seguire Ave. in Princes Bay.

The new home offers an extra living and recreation room, neither of which were available in Princes Bay. Gwen Bryant, house manager, called the renovated building "more luxurious living."

Ms. Krause said the residents were thrilled by the deck at the rear of the house. "They have a deck and trees that shade it. They love to have barbecues," she said.

Monsignor John Servodidio of St. Joseph's R.C. Church in Rosebank and president of the Board of Visitors of the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office blessed the home,

sprinkling each room with holy water.

Homes like these "are long overdue," Monsignor Servodidio said. "Thank God the scandal at Willowbrook brought everyone to their senses. Bring these people into the community where they belong. This gives them a normal experience of life and it's extremely important." During the 1970s poor living conditions were uncovered at Willowbrook State School. The facility eventually became the Staten Island Development Center, which shut down in the late 1980s.

Neighbors adjacent to the Great Kills home received hand-delivered invitations to the open house, although none attended during the first hours of the reception.

The home's residents, all women between the ages of 24 and 70, spent much of yesterday at workshops and day-treatment centers. The residents range from profoundly to moderately mentally retarded and all are "Willowbrook-class members," Ms. Krause said, referring to the former Staten Island Developmental Center.

The price tag on the purchase and renovation of the house was about \$50,000 per resident — or about a half million dollars, said Bob Witkowsky, director of the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office. "Compared to the cost of institutional care, it's a substantial savings," he said.

During the public hearings held last November by Community Board 3, area residents raised numerous objections to the group homes, including the proximity of other group homes, the lack of nearby shopping and the danger the group-home residents would face from motorists who speed through the area.

Witkowsky predicted that the objections will fade with time.

"Once we're here and established, we'll blend in and be good neighbors," he said.

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