

Disabled
Workers.
Continued

agency finds work for mildly developmentally disabled adults in the community supplemented by intensive training and supervision. But agency representatives and parents say the clients are not capable of the suggested program, and are better off continuing to take part in the sheltered workshop.

At the workshop on Bay Street in Tompkinsville there are currently 165 developmentally disabled adults performing jobs that require varied levels of training.

Tony Esposito, the supported work program coordinator for the agency, said he currently has about 20 clients working in the community, filling jobs from fast-food workers to home health aides. But, he said, it takes time to develop the training necessary for developmentally disabled adults before they can get jobs in the community, and not all of these people will be able to find competitive work.

"There will be people that will never, ever, leave the workshop," Esposito said.

Parents say they have accepted their children's limited abilities and, in many cases, are simply happy to have a place for their children to go each day.

"I think that the program here is very good for my son," said Raymond Mullins, whose 44-year-old son, Raymond Jr., has been at the workshop for about two years. His mother, Mary, said Raymond was "wearing out his room" before starting the program, because all he would do was stay home and watch television.

"The idea is that he has something to look forward to," the West Brighton mother said. "He knows he has to get up in the morning. He has a purpose in life. This is what he's going to do."

Mrs. Mullins and the other parents of furloughed clients are worried about the weeklong break their children will have to deal

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— Joseph Locicero, whose son has been with the agency nearly three years.

with. Friedland said the agency does not have space in other programs they could attend for a week, since funding for all programs is based on state aid formulas.

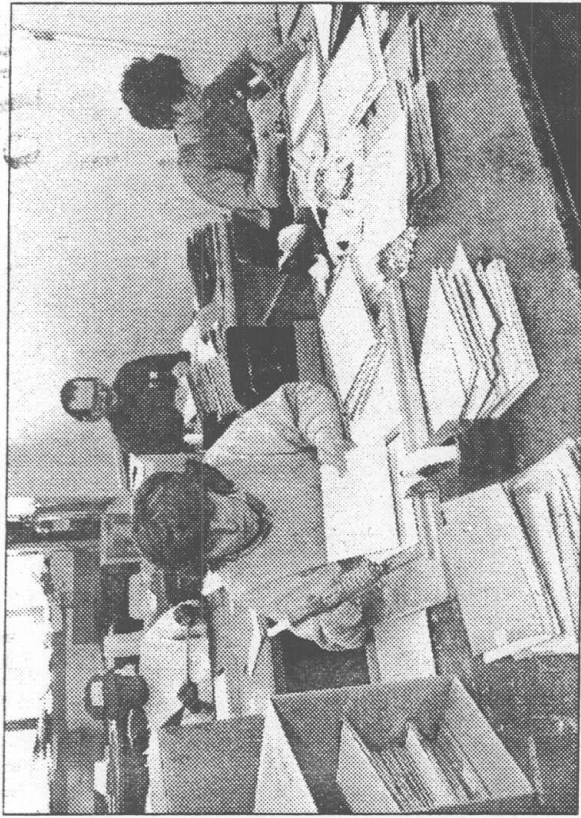
Joseph Locicero, 31, will probably spend his furlough week visiting siblings and spending time with his parents, Joseph and Rita. But his father would rather see him attend the workshop.

"He didn't start living until he was in this program," Locicero said of his son, who has been in the workshop for nearly three years. "I really don't know what would happen if they took him out of here."

Mrs. Locicero said it will be difficult to explain to Joseph why he can't attend the workshop during his furlough. "He doesn't want to stay home," she said. "It gives him a sense of independence."

Friedland said the state funding changes are not isolated to his agency, but also affect the other workshops on the Island and around the state. Different agencies have dealt with the problem as best they can, he said. "Our backs are to the wall from a revenue standpoint."

Agency workers think decisions about who is ready to attempt work in the community should be made by the professionals that deal with the clients in consultation with parents or guardians. "The state really does. I know



Lynn Wells, left, and Maria Falconieri assemble picture frames in the agency's workshop.

our people," Friedland said. "We know our people intimately."

Connie Burrus, a social worker at the workshop, said people with developmental disabilities are stigmatized in the outside world, and find a comfortable place among their peers at the workshop. "The community is not as receptive as we hoped they would be," she said. Employers understandably are wary about hiring people with developmental disabilities because they are concerned about their ability to do the work required, the amount of sick time they might need and other issues.

Esposito said to secure a job in competitive employment for a client, he often must first get doctors' notes and other paperwork that guarantees the person can perform. "Employers expect people to be able to produce the same as a non-handicapped person," he said.

Bruce Koenigsberg, the manager of the Bay Street workshop, said the clients there are paid small amounts according to what

they produce, but client salaries are not the primary concern. "The reason to be here is not a question of productivity," he said. "That's not the reason we're a sheltered workshop."

Koenigsberg is also concerned about the people who will never have the skills necessary to work in the community. "I think that the federal government and the states, not only New York state, are going to reduce the services in the workshops" until they are forced to close," he said. "And I think it is a mistake."

"We will develop the extraordinary programs," he said. "But don't turn your back on the people we will not be able to place."

Koenigsberg said the workshop will still accept new clients who are eligible for state funding, which could mean the 20 in question will be furloughed even more than one week, or more than one client might be furloughed at one time. "The other alternative is just to send these people out," he said. "How can we do that?"