

Rudy's cuts threaten programs for disabled

200 Islanders band together to protest mayor's budget plan

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Dozens of Staten Island programs for people with developmental disabilities will be forced to shut their doors Jan. 1 if Mayor Rudolph Giuliani does not modify his latest round of budget cuts, advocates said yesterday.

More than 200 Islanders rallied against the cuts in the West Brighton headquarters of the Staten Island Mental Health Society and made plans to fight a budget they said would literally eliminate services run by agencies throughout the city.

One portion of their fight will take place on the steps of City Hall tomorrow at 11 a.m. when parents, clients and workers from agencies in the five boroughs will rally against the budget.

The mayor's budget includes a \$4.42 million cut to the Office of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Alcoholism Services for mental retardation programs from January to June 1995, and elimination of \$9.3 million in fiscal years 1996 and 1997. The page

detailed the cuts states the "city is not mandated to provide these services" as the reason behind the funding slash.

About \$2.5 million of this funding goes to services on Staten Island.

Giuliani spokesman Forest Taylor said the city is hoping the state will maintain the matching funds that provide some funding for a portion of the agencies involved.

But Kenneth Pople, executive director of the Staten Island Mental Health Society, said the state Office of Retardation and Developmental Disabilities commissioner has told him the matching funds cannot be provided if the city drops its funding.

"Legally, if the city is not putting in its matching money, then the state by law cannot put in its matching funds," Pople said.

"Every city dollar that's lost, you lose a state dollar."

Taylor maintained the state has a choice. "The state at its discretion can maintain funding," he said.

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— Lucy Buttermark, Graniteville

"The mayor has asked all agencies to make spending reductions," Taylor stated. "All agencies have been asked to pare down to their core services."

The rally yesterday brought the group through a range of emotions as parents and clients spoke about what the threatened programs mean to them.

With tears streaming down his face, Jerry Cohen, a Tompkinsville resident, told the crowd how he has been able to find work and a supportive apartment through Island agencies. "Without these programs, I won't have nothing," he said.

Joe Lucerno, an On Your Mark participant who lives in a supportive apartment and has a part-time job, said, "If the mayor does cut the program, I will have nowhere to go."

Stapleton resident Anthony Musetti shared similar thoughts. "When I went into On Your Mark, I got a sense of achievement because I made friends who were just like me," he said, explaining that he had been the object of ridicule at public school and hence avoided going out of his home. "I will be back on that couch watching TV because there will be nothing for me. There's kids like us who really need this program."

Parents who worked to change the system from the days when the only programs were found at places like the former Willowbrook State School, a notorious facility whose neglect of patients was exposed in the early '70s, said they thought the need to justify these services was past.

"I've had to fight all my life for my son," said Lucy Buttermark of Graniteville. Mrs. Buttermark was one of the founding parents of Eden II, which serves autistic children. "My son, John, has grown in leaps and bounds through Eden and On Your Mark, and I refuse and you should refuse to have these programs close."

With a photo of her son, Joel, by her side, Rossville resident Irene Anzel read a letter she has sent to the mayor. "Do you have any idea what cutting these services will mean for these children and adults?" she read. "Their lives will be changed forever. Your cuts will destroy them."

Marla Moley, also a client at On Your Mark, read from her letter to Giuliani as well. "If the funding is cut, I will have lost two of the three jobs I have. If I lose my jobs, it will be harder for me to save up for college and I will sit around my apartment a lot."

Also speaking at the meeting were Assembly members Robert Straniere and Elizabeth Connelly, who reminded the group that this is the first proposal from the mayor on this round of budget cuts.

"I'm not certain the mayor understands the implications of what's being recommended here," Straniere said. "We can make the case and we're going to get a revision."

Mrs. Connelly said she believes the proposal is "cause for alarm."

"These services are always the ones that are easiest to hit because they feel there isn't a constituency," Mrs. Connelly said. "We've had these wars before. I believe that this can be turned around." She also wrote a letter to Giuliani criticizing the cuts.

South Shore City Councilman Vito Fossella Jr. said he and the rest of the Council's Republican delegation met with Deputy Mayor Peter Powers and spent a great deal of time talking about the cuts. "We're going to have to work together to see if there's a way to make restoration," he said. The mayor's office is "very willing and open to discussion to possibly restore the funding," he said.

"We as a council have to exam-

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ine this and come up with a way to do that."

Popler later spoke at a City Hall press conference with Councilwoman Una Clarke, chairwoman of the City Council Subcommittee on Mental Health.

He predicted that whatever money was saved on the programs would be more than eaten up by other agencies as people helped through treatment found themselves unable to work and turning to the social service system.

"This just doesn't make any sense. We're not talking about cuts, but 100 percent elimination," he said.

According to the Staten Island Retardation Disabilities Council, a group made up of parents, clients and workers, the cuts would mean elimination the following programs as of Jan. 1:

- Workshops and supported work programs run by the Association for Children with Retarded Mental Development.

- Evening respite for 160 people at A Very Special Place's community center.

- The Island's only program that cares for people with developmental disabilities who are over 55 years old, which is run by A Very Special Place.

- Home care for 48 families and school respite programs for 10 families run by the Center for Family Support.

- The college program for developmentally disabled adults at the College of Staten Island.

- The day training program at Eden II, Clifton. The cuts would indirectly affect the day skills-development program and the supported employment program as well.

- All outpatient clinical services, the Training In Parenting program and the Education for Adulthood Training, as well as medical management for 110 people with attention deficit disorder, all run by the Elizabeth W. Pouch Center of the Staten Island Mental Health Society.

- The housing preservation and development staff position at the Staten Island Center for Independent Living.

- All services not directly reimbursed by Medicaid or Medi-

care at St. Vincent's North Richmond Community Mental Health Center, including the special psychiatric center for people with developmental disabilities at Bayley Seton Hospital.

- Weekly therapeutic respite and recreation programs for children and adults, family respite and supported work and employment programs, which currently

serve 325 families and has a waiting list of another 300.

- The closing of all workshops and the loss of respite programs, evening and Saturday recreation programs, the Day Training program and some day treatment services run by New York City United Cerebral Palsy.

(Staff writer Donald Gross contributed to this report.)

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