

of program services for CRDD. The staff uses special sensitivity techniques, such as attentiveness and compassion, to help the clients make the proper adjustment.

CRDD also operates intermediate care facilities for clients who require assistance with everyday skills, like brushing their teeth and getting dressed. Independence is acquired little by little every day. Clients get personal satisfaction in many ways, such as doing chores like laundry, decorating their rooms or using public transportation to get to and from part-time jobs.

Just like other big families, clients argue over whose turn it is to set the table or do the dishes. And like teen-agers, they have their share of problems with friends and sweethearts, Mrs. Kirkwood said.

"We try to give them the most individual choices we can. We teach responsibility and try not to infringe on that," said Ms. Mercado.

For instance, rather than attend a workshop, Jim chose to work as a messenger and Joe as a maintenance worker for CRDD. Joe, a computer buff, is also enrolled in a computer class at the College of Staten Island and is looking forward to getting his driver's license.

After 1½ years, the home on Amboy Road is running smoothly, according to Mrs. Kirkwood.

"It's like one big happy family," she said.

### Fear fuels opposition

Fortunately for CRDD the group homes have "merged nicely" with the homeowners in the seven North and South Shore communities where the agency's facilities are in operation, according to CRDD staff.

"Community opposition is involved in each home, but a good

pre-plan" can help alleviate neighbors' apprehensions and fears, Ms. Mercado said.

Pre-planning involves proposing the idea to the community board in the area and then going door to door, talking to neighbors.

Fear and confusion about the clients' mental state and the operation of the home are the key reasons for residents' resistance, she said.

"It's tough for people to accept, but if you're a good neighbor, people will accept you," Ms. Mercado said.

Ms. Kirkwood said when the home on Amboy Road opened, the clients got together and baked cookies for their neighbors. The neighbors were receptive to the gesture, she said.

But facilities that cater to disabled people can meet with resistance if residents are unfamiliar with the agency running it or have no prior experience with group homes.

Since the court order to phase out the SIDC in Willowbrook was signed in the late 1980s, group homes for the disabled have popped up in many Island communities.

And the controversy over the siting of group homes also has grown. It's rare that a home is proposed without a community protest.

At public meetings where opposition is expressed about a service for mentally or physically disabled clients, the most common concerns are that the group home will devalue property and threaten the safety of neighborhood children.

That's far from the truth, according to some people living near group homes.

"They're wonderful neighbors, and the people who work there are so nice," said Deborah Monplaisir, who lives near a United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) group home on Madsen Avenue in

As far as people go, they're people like anybody else, they have feelings, and they have just a little more needs than those of us who can walk on two feet," she said, noting that she lets her five children, who range in age from 3 to 10, visit with the residents who have mental and physical disabilities.

Ms. Monplaisir said the house is kept "immaculate and the yard is kept well. There is nothing there to devalue property."

Alice Siviglia, who lives near a new UCP group home on Sharrotts Road in Charleston, agreed.

"I welcome them. I wish they were my next-door neighbors. They're very nice, the people are delightful," she said.

If a problem arises within the community about how a group home is run, every state or private agency catering to the developmentally disabled has a community advisory board, said Ron Byrne, spokesman for the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD).

"I believe without any question, group homes throughout Staten Island and the state of New York can live in the community and be good neighbors," Byrne said.

He said if people report problems with group homes, OMRDD will investigate.

Sometimes neighbors are under the mistaken impression that the group home residents will be mentally ill rather than mentally disabled.

A person is labeled mentally disabled if his or her emotional development is slower than the norm. A mental illness is a psychological disorder.

Neighbors also often feel that, while group homes are needed, their neighborhood has become oversaturated with such services. Community opposition also stems from unfamiliarity.

"It's a fear of the unknown," said Joseph Carr, district manager of Community Board 1. Louis Caravone, chairman of Board 2, said the state should establish a list of the different types of group homes.

"People tend to lump all group homes together, and this is unfair to the worthwhile programs," Caravone said.

Said Ms. Mercado of CRDD, "There is fear no matter how much you educate people... it doesn't hit home until it actually affects them personally."

Jacqueline Rumolo, director of community affairs and community support services for UCP, said people also oppose group homes because, "They're afraid homes aren't supervised, and they fear workers from other neighborhoods."

In the case of group homes for disabled people, much of that fear evaporates after the facility is opened.

For instance, A Very Special Place faced fierce opposition in 1992 when it proposed a group home for 10 mentally and developmentally disabled adults at 70 Benton Ave., Dongan Hills. At one Community Board 2 meeting, residents accused the board and A Very Special Place of "steamrolling" their concerns, and several walked out.

Bernard Kosinski, a Dongan Hills resident and board member at the time, said at that meeting that the area was too congested with social services to accept another group home. Now, three years later, he says there hasn't been a problem with the facility.

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