

Some favor big institutions

■ They argue that the Willowbrook State School did not have to close despite its notorious problems

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The Staten Island Developmental Center, which under the name the Willowbrook State School became known as a snakepit of abuse and neglect, closed seven years ago. Now some residents want to reopen it.

Behind the walls that now house part of the Island's largest educational complex, the College of Staten Island's Willowbrook campus, was once an institution where nearly 6,000 residents lived each day in pain and fear.

In the 1970s the Advance uncovered tales of overcrowded wards, children wandering around half naked and starving, and young men forced to sleep, eat and defecate in a single concrete room.

While most people agree the neglect and poor treatment of Willowbrook's developmentally disabled residents was unacceptable, community activists like Lorraine Sorge and Joe Valentin, of the Staten Island Taxpayers'

Association, say the facility, if run properly, could have worked.

Instead of closing it down, the state should have addressed the problems and kept the center's doors open, they said.

"Whatever happened, they should have monitored better. But they didn't have to shut it down," said Valentin.

"Now [we] have no control. When it was open, we had more control of them [the developmentally disabled]; we knew who they were. We only had one or two escape, but that was it. Now we have them in the street, mingling with people," he said.

Although Ms. Sorge said she agrees with caring properly for the developmentally disabled, "I believe they never should have closed Willowbrook because they knew the problems and should have corrected them."

"They [Staten Island Developmental Center] handed us this unsolvable problem and left it on the emotions of the parents," she added.

But residents who wish for the return of institutions like the center face opposition among government officials and service providers for the developmentally disabled.

Since the center closed in accord with a court settlement "virtually all" the 5,343 former residents have been placed into homes in the community, said Ron Byrne, spokesman for the state Office of Mental Retardation and

homes, Byrne argued, but they make sense from a fiscal standpoint. More tax dollars are spent on large institutions, which have more overhead, than on group homes, he said.

It costs \$121,000 a year to care for a person in an institution, while an average of \$80,000 is expended to care for an individual in a community-based facility, Byrne said.

CHANGE NY, a state fiscal watchdog group, supports the state's use of not-for-profit group homes over institutions, saying the homes are cost-effective and provide better care. It has studied the state's use of such residential facilities and come to the conclusion that private groups often do the job better than the state itself.

"We think in every instance possible, the state should be moving away from expensive institutions to community-based group homes," said Brian Backstrom, acting president of the statewide organization. "And we have been seeing an increase in that direction, but it's moving very slowly away from institutions."

Backstrom said he thought people who preferred the institutions to group homes probably weren't well-informed about the fiscal effects of such a policy and the impact it would have on client care.

"There's some NIMBY [Not In My Backyard] syndrome there; too," he said.

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Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD).

United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) was one of the agencies that helped center residents make the transition from the institution to life on the outside.

"It was literally like the state workers walked out. UCP's mission was to get people out into homes and into the community," said Jacqueline Rumolo, director of community affairs and community support services for the agency. "We were able to place hundreds of people in a few years, in places all over the city."

Not only is care better in group

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