

Neighbors' concerns fuel 'NIMBY' attitudes

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 cation," Byrne observed. "It's really just that people don't know."

The arguments put forward to oppose group homes are invariably the same, noted Paul T. Pickering, diocesan director of the Catholic Charities Residential Program, which operates six community residences in Monroe County.

The usual arguments against group homes include: property values will decline; children will not be safe; the home will change the neighborhood's character; and the homes will ruin the tax base because they are run by not-for-profit agencies.

"When those arguments fail, then they will tell you there's a lot of traffic, or there's no traffic light, so it will be unsafe for the residents," Pickering reported. "You want to say to people, 'If it's so unsafe, why are you living here?'"

And, Byrne observed, the data contradicts most of those arguments.

In fact, the state's Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities has released a report, titled

did nothing wrong to be locked up in an institution," he declared.

In 1963, however, the late President John F. Kennedy told Congress that a "desperate need" existed "for community facilities and services for the mentally retarded and the nation must move from the outmoded use of distant custodial institutions to the concept of community-centered agencies."

By the 1970s, according to Byrne, deinstitutionalization began on a large scale in New York state. This process involved not only the mentally retarded, but people with mental illness and developmental disabilities.

Since deinstitutionalization began in the state, Byrne said, the number of development centers, for example, has dropped from 20 to five. He predicted that those five centers will close by the year 2,000. Since the 1960s, the population in those centers has also dropped from 26,000 to 6,000.

Meanwhile, Byrne continued, approximately 2,300 group homes now house 23,000 residents. A total of 80,000 people are also involved in day



Catherine Hughes gets ready for a visit from a friend from work who lives in a group home in the 19th Ward.

There Goes the Neighborhood, which summarizes the results of 58 studies of group homes conducted between 1973-89.

The report — produced by the Community Residences Information Services Program — concluded that: "The presence of group homes in all the areas studied has not lowered property values or increased turnover, not increased crime, not changed the character of the neighborhood."

Behind all these arguments is another element, Pickering noted.

Fear.
 "I think it's fear of the unknown," he said. "I think it's a lot of stereotyping. I think it's fear of differences."

Those fears existed long before the development of group homes, Pickering said. Up until the 1960s, people had little contact with the developmentally disabled, emotionally troubled, epileptics, and other individuals who were perceived as "different."

These "different" individuals were generally kept in institutions, such as the psychiatric or developmental centers located in Rochester, Newark and Craig, Pickering explained.

But the large institutions proved inadequate, Zeoli noted. Some were overcrowded, understaffed and in need of repair, he said.

Furthermore, Zeoli added, they were designed like prisons. "These people

did nothing wrong to be locked up in an institution," he declared.

The small group homes, Zeoli said, "offer better care, more individual care, better integration into the community."

They are also more cost effective, Byrne said. He noted that institutional care costs approximately \$115,000 per person per year, while group home care runs approximately \$80,000.

Meanwhile, under state law, an agency wishing to open a group home has to follow a strict, complicated procedure, Pickering reported.

As part of the process, the agency first maps out the community to reveal the location of any other group homes, and thus avoid oversaturation, Pickering explained. The group home must also be designed to be in character for the neighborhood in which it is to be located.

Once plans for the proposed group home are developed, the agency must contact the local municipal government, which has 40 days to offer objections to the plan. If none are offered, the agency proceeds with purchasing and developing the home, Pickering said.

If there are objections, however, a site hearing must be held. The appropriate state agency will then judge the merits of the objections. Opponents may also file a lawsuit.

However, Byrne noted that because



(Above) Gregory Herman (right) and his girlfriend, Lorraine Passino, get together during a weekly bowling league at Webster's Empire Lanes, sponsored by Catholic Charities Group Homes. Passino is a resident at the agency's Cloverdale home. (At left) Kathleen Brennenman takes care of her daily chores after returning from work.



Photos by Babette G. Augustin

agencies generally do their background work, site proposals are rarely overturned. He pointed out that since he had arrived at his state office in 1978, only two of the hundreds of site proposals were ultimately rejected.

Thus, Byrne acknowledged, people who challenge group homes will more than likely fail. And, he added, more than 90 percent of group home proposals go through without opposition.

In some cases, however, agencies do change sites even though they may open the homes at the proposed sites, Byrne acknowledged. They generally do so, he said, because a better site has been found, or to maintain good public relations.

And once in place, the homes are generally accepted, Zeoli observed.

"What we have seen, is the longer a home is there, the more in place it becomes," Zeoli said. "It is no more than another home on the street."

But no matter how many times the benefits are cited or the arguments refuted, some people become upset when an agency attempts to open a group home in their neighborhood, Byrne acknowledged.

"My impression is the people who come to site selection hearings are sin-

cere," Byrne reported. "They are concerned about their block, their neighborhood."

Zeoli noted that to help allay those concerns, his agency has developed a variety of informational and educational programs. Group homes often hold open houses as well. Once residents have moved in, they take part in a variety of church and community activities so their faces become familiar around town.

Most agencies also create community advisory boards when a group home opens, Zeoli continued. Those boards give people a chance to voice concerns. "After three to six months," he said, most of the committees break up because members say, "There's nothing for us to do."

Despite past successes, however, agencies must continue their efforts to educate people about the realities and effects of group homes, Byrne observed.

"(The New York State Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities) and agencies just have to keep on doing public education as best we can," he concluded.