

Community placement is key

Plymouth Center team aims for phase-out

By RICHARD PERLBERG

The state is trying to put mentally retarded persons in their proper place. And that place, says the head of the group trying to accomplish that, is in the community.

"Philosophically, no one needs to be in an institution," said Frank Schuch, the director of placement of the Plymouth Center for Human Development in Northville Township.

The center's attempt to get the retarded out of the institution is one result following disclosure of patient neglect and abuse at PCHD.

Population at the center has dropped from more than 800 to about 660 in the last 15 months. Some patients were transferred to other regional institutions.

OTHERS WERE placed in family foster care home for youngsters and group homes for adults.

"The only thing preventing someone from moving out of an institution is the non-availability of an appropriate environment in the community to meet their needs," Schuch said.

The concept of group homes in resi-

denial settings for moderately retarded adults created a three-month long controversy in Livonia. The city council in early February unanimously gave special permission to a private, non-profit organization to build a home for 16 adults on the northwest corner of Lyndon and Raisinbridge, one block east of Merriman.

The action, which came one month after a favorable recommendation from the city's planning commission, triggered a civil suit in Wayne County Circuit Court to block construction of the home and a recall campaign against the mayor and seven councilmen who supported the home. The recall drive has since been dropped.

THERE IS a Friday, April 27, court hearing on the lawsuit filed by opponents of the group home.

The problems at PCHD came out about 15 months ago.

Since the lawsuits and publicity, an admissions freeze has been instituted at the center, the staff has doubled and steps were taken to end the use of the center as a long-term institution.

Schuch said he is trying to place eight residents a month — about 100

placements a year and 300 to 500 during the next three to five years.

Eventually, he said, the plan is to change the Plymouth center into a 120-bed, short-term facility.

"This is not a home," he said. "The purpose is not to have somebody out here the rest of his life. The facility should be used only when the community can't deal with the problem."

IT WILL BE the placement unit's job to not only find and develop suitable living settings in Wayne County but also to set up appropriate support services and monitoring methods.

When Schuch talks about community placement, he means the entire community. In the past, group homes have tended to be concentrated in narrow areas of Detroit and Inkster.

"We are interested in and we want to develop neighborhoods that are not saturated (with group homes) and that provide a safe environment for our residents," he said.

That doesn't exclude Detroit, he adds, but it brings some western Wayne County suburbs like Livonia, Plymouth and Northville into the picture.

It also raises the problem of commu-

nity resistance, especially against group homes which house six adults and are operated by private corporations which may or may not be non-profit.

SPONSOR OF the Livonia group home is Community Opportunity Center, a private, non-profit organization which has built a facility for 16 persons in Plymouth and is planning others in Livonia, Redford Township, Northville and Garden City.

Schuch expects opposition even though state law prohibits the exclusion of group homes with six or less

persons from residential neighborhoods through zoning or deed restrictions.

"We got two strikes against us," he said.

"Number one, we represent Plymouth and people think are we dumping our problems.

"The second strike is that we represent a system — a bureaucracy, faceless and impersonal.

"The strategy is to go into each community and lay a base. We want them to know what mental retardation is. We're dealing with a lot of myths, fear and bias."

THE PROFESSION is partly to blame for that, Schuch said.

"The system has a responsibility for educating the public and that hasn't been done. They (neighbors) have a right to be informed.

In turn, we would want the community to be reasonable with us."

But if the community isn't receptive, the placements will continue to be made. Placement teams want to be cooperative, says Schuch, but they will present an advocate's profile.

"If we're not placing him, we're violating that person's right to a least restrictive environment," he concluded.



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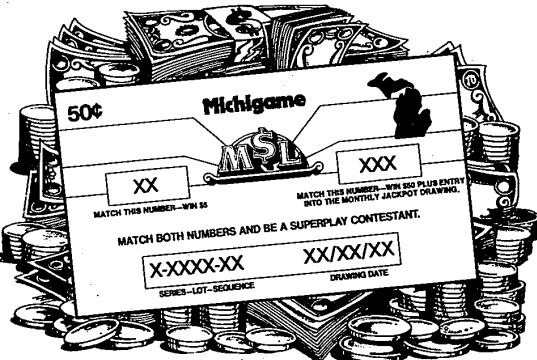
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