

Opposition organized**Friends of group homes seek lobby**By Suzie Rollins Singer
staff writer

Just say "A foster home for retarded adults is opening in the block," and scores of angry and worried people are sure to be nearby.

"We've got to realize that we're not going to get wholesale acceptance. We have to learn how to change people's attitudes," said Laurel Berger, a community liaison coordinator with the Michigan Department of Mental Health.

"Communication with the community is most important," added Julie Cunningham, a neighbor of a group home for retarded adults in Flint.

"You should get the community involved, get to know the local newspaper reporters. There are positive things going on in the homes that need local media attention," she said.

MS. BERGER and Ms. Cunningham were two of five panelists discussing neighborhood resistance to group homes and ways to overcome it. The meeting Monday was sponsored by the Awareness Communication Team (ACT).

ACT is an organization which works to enhance public understanding of people with developmental disabilities.

About 75 persons — some from foster care agencies, several neighborhood council members and others involved in the group home concept — braved the cold to hear the panel.

Other panelists included state Sen. Doug Ross, D-Oak Park; Irene Ametrano, who recently completed a study on neighborhood reactions to group homes; Rev. Philip Seymour of the Good Shepherd United Methodist Church in Dearborn; and Anne Sipher, administrative assistant for the Association for Retarded Citizens in Oakland County.

Under a law enacted in April 1977, the state De-

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partment of Social Services was empowered to license homes in residential neighborhoods for use as foster care facilities for retarded adults.

As state law, it includes local deed restrictions and zoning regulations. In a licensed home, a licensed operator, either an independent or one affiliated with the Department of Social Services, administers the home. They are monitored by a Social Services representative.

WHEN A HOME is targeted as a foster home, the state sends a letter informing the local officials of the impending opening. Often, the agency voluntarily holds a public hearing, inviting residents to hear about the new operation.

"I prefer to stay away from the large public hearings," said Ms. Berger. "They are a no-win situation. Usually there are two or three families adamantly against it."

"Other times we find well-organized people from other communities opposing the home."

"I prefer setting up a temporary information center where people can drop in and have a cup of coffee and discuss the home's operation," Ms. Berger said.

MOST OFTEN, neighbors of proposed group homes fear their property values will decline, more homes will pop up nearby and the prestige of the area will be reduced when retarded adults move in, Ms. Ametrano said.

Neighbors are also concerned about the staff members involved, as well as the clients endangering the neighborhood children.

"The fear of the unknown is a natural reaction. But those fears have to be cleared up. We need to educate the elected leaders in communities about developmentally disabled persons so they can help us," Rev. Seymour said.

"I don't worry about arguing with the 'antis,' because they're not going to convert them. But I also believe the majority of Americans are fair-minded and once they understand those people they'll accept them," he added.

SEN. ROSS advised the social workers and mental health specialists to organize a lobbyist group supporting group homes.

"The laws that control community placement can be changed, and proposed amendments are on-going," Ross said, adding:

"There is no organized political presence supporting the homes. There's only organized opposition."

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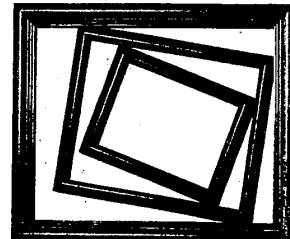
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