

Dignity for retarded

Retarded persons represent about three percent of the nation's population, according to U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare statistics.

That amounts to six million persons.

In Michigan, there are about 878,000 retarded persons with 90 percent classified as mildly retarded. Those considered mildly retarded have language skills, ability to communicate, physical coordination and social skills on the same level as elementary school age students ten years old and under.

The other retarded fall into one of three categories: Moderately retarded — language skills, ability to communicate, physical coordination and social skills on the level of children 4 to 5 years old. Severely retarded — skills and abilities on the level of children 1 to 3 years old, extremely limited vocabulary. Profoundly retarded — the same skills and abilities on the level of children six months to 18 months old, vocabulary of only a few words, if any.

Nearly 98 percent of Michigan's retarded live outside of institutions with the balance of 5,000 still in institutions.

A mental health department wrote the Observer & Eccentric last year that the purpose of community living, such as in group homes, "is to give every mentally retarded person the opportunity to progress at his or her maximum level of functioning. This is not possible in the segregated, abnormal confines of an institution. It is possible, and has been successfully accomplished in the normal, home environment of a group home."

The state representative added that a "normal" child's develop-



ment would be hindered if kept in an institution.

"THE ISSUE is not why are they coming back but rather why did they ever have to leave in the first place? They left because of the lack of available services in the community.

"Until the early 1970s when the mandatory special education act was signed, mentally retarded people didn't even have schools to attend. The institution was the only answer."

Retarded persons people "are more like us than not like us," the state has said.

"They have feelings, needs and goals, just like we do. Their potential for growth and learning is hindered and limited when confined to an institution — just like ours would be if we were 'put away.'"

"The goal for the retarded is not to become normal or independent. The goal is to give the opportunity for growth and to secure the human rights of mentally retarded people to live in the community."

Northville: months to learn

(Continued from Page 3A)

The residents are served two disposal containers of Kellogg's Frosted Flakes, soft boiled eggs, tomato juice and coffee. The eight men in my group were grouped at two tables.

Lunch was a bologna sandwich with rice salad, tomato soup, jello and milk.

Most of my "roommates" were neat but Young has to clean up after one or two.

I just didn't like dinner.

It was slices of roast beef and scalloped potatoes which were not hot.

IN MID-AFTERNOON, I was a "victim" of Danny, about 30, who has the build of a professional athlete. But he is also deaf and has mental illness problems.

During the afternoon workshop session, Danny rapped another resident with the back of his muscular arm. He was quickly removed.

When I returned to my dayroom, Danny got a second wind. He gave me a gentle whack and then tried to bite the arm of another resident.

Again he was taken away, probably to the "quiet room," a small room off the dayroom which has no furniture or equipment in it.

With persistent training and help, they take weeks or months to learn simple things like eating effectively, putting on matching shoes and taking care of themselves and their clothes.

A short while later, a mental health department residents' rights advisor stopped by to find out how I was doing. I was told several days later that a required report on my "incident" was filed.

THE MEN TAKE showers in a group. Attendants helped them get soaped, rinsed, shampooed, dried and powdered.

I spent most of my evening hours watching a color television in my dayroom and chatting with attendants about their jobs.

The attendants want to do a good job for persons who need special help.

But they seemed frustrated by the announcements of layoffs of mental health employees.

They don't support the concept of group homes for the retarded, saying that most of the homes' employees are paid only the minimum wage or slightly more.

(A NRTC spokesman said residential care aides in state institutions are members of a union and start at \$5.54 an hour in the lowest classification and can work up to \$8.59 per hour in higher classifications and seniority levels.)

One attendant who formerly worked at Plymouth Center for Human Development, said that if the same equipment provided in group homes — like kitchen appliances — were installed in state facilities the residents would improve their skills just as fast.

J Building has a staff ratio of one attendant to eight residents.

There will be 26 employees in all levels of NRTC positions laid off this week.

But the administration said the staffing ratio will remain the same since 56 of the 65 J Building residents to be placed in group homes by Aug. 31.

At that time, the building will be closed.

Curtis Young, my daytime attendant, will have his layoff begin this week.

What does he plan to do?

Return to Wayne State University and get my degree," he said.

Group home: a new family

(Continued from Page 3A)

In other classrooms, physically handicapped persons in wheelchairs have a "model" apartment with beds and kitchen where they learn how to live independent of help.

TERRY BAKER, a workshop instructor from Dearborn Heights, works with the five Wentworth residents and about five others who have serious learning problems.

Sharon is an exception but she has a short attention span and is constantly out of her seat — but she gets the puzzles done quickly.

Gary is still learning how to handle sticks individually instead of grabbing a dozen and throwing them on the table.

The center, funded by the state, is headed by Jude McCutcheon.

Most of the Wentworth residents have a full schedule at the workshop: mornings and afternoons assigned for communications skills, grooming, self-care, and mobility, or the improved coordination of arms and legs.

WHILE THE RESIDENTS are in the workshop classes during the weekdays, Michael Brown, 25, of Garden City, handles the paper work needed to run the group home.

Brown is the business manager of Domel, Inc., the private, non-profit organization which manages the home, hires, and supervises its six employees.

He is the son of Dorothy Brown of Livonia, who is formed the group last year and is executive director.

The Browns and all employees have gone through the required 120 hours of training at Northville Residential Training Center in northwest Wayne County.

While supervisor Rose Merucci prepares the meal/dinner in late afternoon, the Browns and employee Janice Allen help the residents to play with puzzles and Legos (plastic building blocks) and other toys which improve coordination.

The Browns talked about the progress their residents made since moving from state institutions into the Wentworth home in late September.

Gary still needs the one-to-one employee attention but is progressing, the Browns said.

He is getting his own food and dressing himself.

Johnny was passive and quiet when he first moved into the group home last fall. He is now gaining language skills and once blurted out "hurts like the devil."

Sharon is the most advanced of the five residents described to us. Her vocabulary is improving, she sets and clears the table and she has longer attention spans. She previously was "very fidgety."

When Carol first arrived from Oakland, she had never spoken. Her first word, uttered in November, was "telephone." The Browns said her mother cried in learning that her daughter can say something.

Linda is usually lethargic but loves to accept new responsibilities, the Browns said. One major improvement since moving out of a state institution is that she is not suffering as many seizures as before.



An inside look

Leonard Poger, an Observer & Eccentric editor, has written extensively about the controversies involving proposed homes for retarded persons in residential neighborhoods.

Poger visited a group home for severely retarded residents (mental age: one to three) and spent 25 hours with them to get a better look at how they live in a group home setting. To get another view, Poger spent a similar period with a group of profoundly retarded male adults (mental age: six to 18 months) living in a typical institution — the Northville Residential Training Center.

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