

IN THE REGION/New Jersey

Opening Doors for the Disabled

By ANTOINETTE MARTIN

THE glint of silver lining can be hard to discern in the formidable cloud cover over the residential market these days, but for some good-hearted groups seeking to house the disabled, it's there.

Take, for instance, Our House, a nonprofit organization that creates housing for developmentally disabled people by buying and renovating single-family homes in suburban communities. It recently bought two houses in excellent shape for very reasonable prices in this affluent community, according to Michele Wernsing, the director of Our House, which is based in Murray Hill.

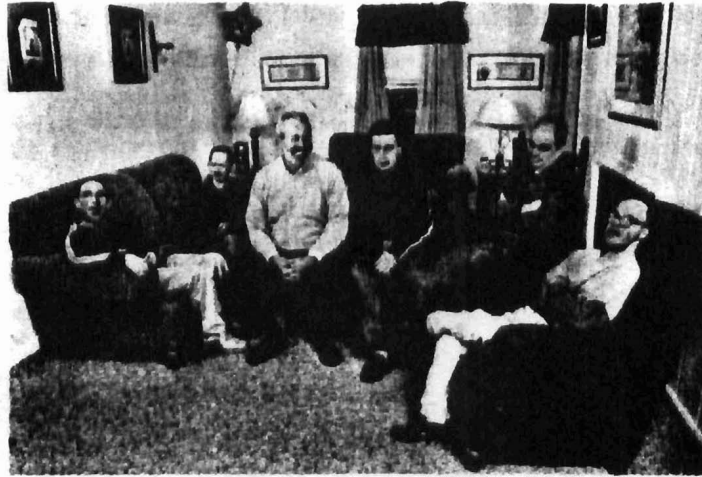
"In today's market," she said, "when we identify a house that fits our residents' needs, we face little competition, and scant opposition." On one of the purchases in Berkeley Heights — in a well-established neighborhood of homes valued at \$1 million and up — Our House was the only bidder. For \$700,000, it scored a five-bedroom ranch with a large yard and a new kitchen.

A four-bedroom house a few blocks away was bought for \$525,000; a four-bedroom ranch in West Orange was also purchased, for \$425,000. All three houses are now being converted, and will open as group homes early next year.

In addition to lower home prices, said George Vallone, the president of Our House's all-volunteer board, there are other factors serving the group's cause. Chief among them are recent revisions made to state Council on Affordable Housing regulations requiring municipalities to ensure that such housing is available within their communities.

Towns typically meet these kinds of obligations by hinging their approval of new developments on the applicants' promises either to bankroll or build a certain quantity of "affordable" housing. Under the program, towns get four extra credits for each unit created for residents with special needs.

In the past, towns were able to meet their affordable-unit quota by taking part in a regional agreement that permitted the trading of credits between mu-



TIMOTHY IVY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A ROOMIER FUTURE

George Vallone, third from left, heads Our House, a nonprofit that has bought larger quarters for residents of a group home in Berkeley Heights: from left, Michael Pater, Doug Jenkins, Christopher Andreas, Tony Curcio and Frank Morello.

nicipalities. The recent changes eliminated this option, explained Mr. Vallone, a developer with a company called Hoboken Brownstone, and now each town must meet its own obligations.

Fair-housing laws have always prohibited discrimination against home buyers, he added, "so now there is an open path in any municipality where a group home is needed."

Another revision to the regulations set the average cost per unit of affordable housing at \$160,000. Previously, Mr. Vallone said, the amount a developer would contribute to affordable housing was negotiated, and ordinarily fell well below that figure.

All three of the new Our House group homes are being created as a result of collaborations with town officials to obtain the money to buy, update and retrofit houses so that they are handicapped-accessible, Mr. Vallone said.

In West Orange, where Prism Capital Partners is at work on a large-scale mixed-use redevelopment project, Mayor John F. McKeon brought Prism together with Our House. The developer paid \$200,000 toward creation of the group home, and the town earned four affordable-housing credits.

Berkeley Heights has an Affordable Housing Trust Fund,

which developers have paid into, and which dispenses money to nonprofit groups like Our House. It contributed \$350,000 toward purchase of the two new houses.

The Berkeley Heights mayor, David A. Cohen, worked with Our House to assure that it could afford the purchases after the agency explained that it needed to provide more suitable homes for a group of men already living in the community, Mr. Vallone said.

"He understood that we were trying to assist developmentally disabled men, who are getting older, and who were living in a cramped two-story house, where the stairs were becoming a problem," he said.

The two houses in Berkeley Heights will be the new homes of six men, all with mental disabilities — some congenital, others a result of traumatic brain injury. They have all lived for many years in a small three-bedroom house, opened as an Our House group home 27 years ago. One of the men has lived there the entire 27 years, Ms. Wernsing said.

"We did an assessment several years ago, and determined the average age of our residents is 50," she said, "and began to face the reality that when someone moves in with us at age 20 or 25, they're going to be with us the rest of their lives."

Dr. Richard V. Olsen, a professor of environmental psychology at the New Jersey Institute of Technology and a member of the Our House board, outlined the real estate requirements of older people with disabilities: "a ranch house on a level lot, since wheelchairs might become a necessity; abundant natural light to accommodate aging eyes; easy flow between the rooms; and wide aisles and door frames."

Another board member, Peter Wisniewski, who is a commercial real estate broker with the David Cronheim Company in Chatham, searched the residential listings for houses that fit the bill and brokered the purchases.

Mr. Vallone hired an architect familiar with special-needs design to devise plans for rehabilitating the structures, and a construction crew to do the renovations.

The work proceeds apace this fall. The five-bedroom house, for example, has been converted to have four large bedrooms, and has been given two new baths, new skylights, a new deck and wider hallways. Ramps are about to be installed, and then some floors will be refinished or recarpeted with nonskid material.

The men who will be benefiting from all these efforts haven't been told about them yet, at the request of families and aides. "They will hear about it, and start coming to see the new place, about six weeks before they move," Ms. Wernsing said. "That seems to be the right amount of time — not too long, and not too short a time for them to adjust."

Our House provides both support and employment services. Some residents of its group homes — who may also receive state-financed services or take part in state-financed programs — work part time.

The group, which operates group homes and supported-living apartments in four counties — Essex, Morris, Somerset and Union — was founded in 1980 by a Summit woman, Patricia Shillingburg, whose developmentally disabled child had turned 18 and "aged out" of existing support programs. It is financed through grants, donations, bequests and fund-raising events, including an annual 10-kilometer run in Summit.