



Photographs by Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Vilma Marion was mostly packed yesterday because she had expected her group home in Brooklyn to close.

## Judge Postpones Closing of Group Home

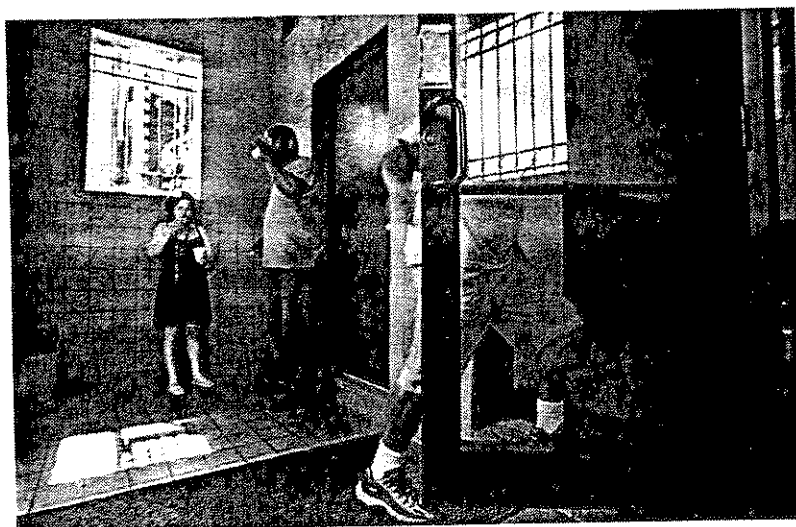
By SOMINI SENGUPTA

They sat wordlessly in the cool foyer, or paced the sidewalk, bolstered by coffee and cigarettes. Some began packing their belongings, for the word yesterday morning was that the people who ran their group home would imminently shut its doors.

All of them mentally ill, many of them veterans of the city's homeless shelters, the residents of Pacific House in Bedford-Stuyvesant fretted and waited.

But by midafternoon came a temporary reprieve, like a burst of summer rain. A State Supreme Court judge ordered Pacific House to remain open until July 26, by which time its 26 remaining residents will have to be placed elsewhere by the State Department of Health.

The stipulation by Justice Richard D. Huttner was made after a three-hour closed hearing. Lawyers for Pacific House, founded in 1991 by the Rev. Clarence Norman Sr., the father of the Brooklyn Democratic chairman, had said the home no longer had any money to stay open. Nearly \$50,000 in utility bills had not been paid.



Nurys Pierna and Harry Hutchinson, residents of Pacific House, waited yesterday for word of a judge's decision on whether to close the home.

The home will be kept open using federal disability money for which the residents are eligible, the court order says.

But that money, totaling \$21,500, falls short of the \$28,000 that is required to keep the place open for the 26 residents until the court-ordered date, a lawyer for Pacific House said. The lawyer, Ravi Batra, said he hoped that some residents would be placed elsewhere before the deadline. With lower costs, he said, the home would be able to stay open longer.

"Hopefully, it will all match up," Mr. Batra said.

Lawyers with MFY Legal Services, a nonprofit group that represents the residents, said they were relieved by the judge's order but also worried about whether their clients would receive the best kinds of placements in all the rush.

"Given the lack of supported housing for people with mental illness, we are concerned whether appropriate placements" can be made within three weeks, said Jeanette Zelhof, managing attorney with MFY Legal Services. "The hasty placements may result in residents leaving the placements because they are not appropriate for them. That's how you contribute to the cycle of the homeless mentally ill."

Ms. Zelhof reserved her most blistering criticism for the State Health Department, the agency responsible for supervising Pacific House, which is at 1140 Pacific Street. She said the state had long known of the home's problems.

A spokesman for the Health Department, Robert Kenny, said his agency had been trying to shut Pacific House for two years because of problems with its finances and quality of care. In January 1998, the agency ordered the home closed, but withdrew the order when a nonprofit group offered to take control.

By the end of 1998, that offer was withdrawn, and last June, the state cited Pacific House for a range of serious violations, from filthy bathrooms to inadequate supervision of residents. The home's administrators failed to submit a correction action plan that is required by law. "They basically disregarded us," Mr. Kenny said.

The Health Department therefore resumed its order to close the home. Initially, that was to happen by Aug. 7. But the Pacific House administrators said they simply had no money to continue operating and had to close. They were blocked by the court order yesterday.

The state will now have to scramble to find placements by July 26.

"We're working with other adult homes in the area to place these individuals," Mr. Kenny said. At Pacific House yesterday afternoon, the news was greeted with a mixture of cynicism and victory.

"Hooray," bellowed Vilma Marion, 56, throwing her arms up in the air in praise of the lawyers who represented the residents. "May God bless you folks. If I had a little extra money, I'd go buy a trophy."

Robert Shavitz, 49, who had lived in a homeless shelter in the Bowery before landing a bed at Pacific House three years ago, was more guarded. "The truth is, nobody really knows what to do," he said, sitting on the

steps of the building, drinking orange soda out of a paper bag. "When you have these kinds of people, people who don't belong in society, nobody cares. They're just trying to unload them on whoever wants them."