

# Metro

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## Panel feasts on political hot potatoes

Human Relations Commission helps 'the damned, the disheveled, the despised'

By Anita Snow  
The Register

The Orange County Human Relations Commission is no stranger to controversy.

Charged with advising the Board of Supervisors on civil rights matters affecting the county's estimated 2 million residents, the commission often carries the political hot potatoes other agencies shun.

"We get involved in a strategic way to diffuse intergroup, interracial tensions," said Rusty Kennedy, the commission's executive director. "We act as advocates for people no one else will get involved with."

Commission staff members acted as mediators in March 1983, when Stanton policeman Anthony Sperl accidentally shot and killed 5-year-old Patrick Mason, Kennedy said.

Supervisor Bruce Nestande praised the group last week for quelling tensions in the county's black community after the county grand jury refused to indict Sperl, who is white, in the shooting of the black child.

Commission staffers also acted as mediators in the Hispanic community this year when the Immigration and Naturalization Service mistakenly deported a 14-year-old legal resident to Tijuana, Kennedy said.

Hispanic community members were outraged in February when Mario Moreno-Lopez was seized from a Santa Ana street corner and taken out of the country without his family's knowledge.

Because the commission is a civil rights group, commissioners and staff members often act as representatives for such minority groups as homosexuals, undocumented workers, Asian refugees and the handicapped.

"The purpose of the commission shall be to seek out the causes of tension and conflict, discrimination and intolerance, based on race, religion, national origin, ethnicity, handicap, age, sex, sexual

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## COMMISSION:

# County panel is an advocate for minorities

preference, socio-economic status, or marital status, and attempt to eliminate those causes," state the bylaws of the group established in 1971.

Gary Granville, an aide to County Supervisor Ralph Clark, praised the group's work. "They're advocates for the damned, the disheveled, the despised," Granville said. "They befriend people that others don't think should be befriended."

The commission is a diverse group of men and women, Democrats and Republicans. A city police chief, a rabbi, a retiree, several housewives and a community college administrator are among the 11 members who are appointed to serve two-year terms.

The Orange County Division of the League of California Cities appoints five members and each of the five county supervisors appoints one member apiece. The entire board appoints an 11th member to serve at large.

The county pays each commissioner \$20 a month to help cover such costs as transportation and telephone calls.

"As you can see, we're primarily volunteers," said member Jean Forbath, who has served on the commission five years — one of

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those years as chairwoman. "We do this because we want to."

The group has a \$207,000 annual budget with which Kennedy administers six full-time staff members. The budget and staff are ultimately overseen by the county Community Services Agency.

"I think we play a very important role in the county," he said.

"But it's not a power role by any stretch of the imagination. We have a low-key approach. That's why a lot of people don't hear about some of the things we're doing."

At their monthly meeting last week, commissioners discussed issues ranging from employers' abuses of undocumented Hispanic workers to employment discrimination against homosexuals.

The commission agreed to let a staff member help Santa Ana organize a multicultural senior citizens center, the first of its kind in the county. The center would serve white, black, Hispanic, Asian, and Samoan senior citizens.

In addition, the group agreed to take part in a cultural-training program for local teachers' aides and school secretaries. The program, to be offered in conjunction with the county Board of Education, would teach participants about Hispanic, Vietnamese, Laotian and other cultures.

The group also gave staff approval to print "worker information cards" designed to discourage the abuse of undocumented Hispanic workers by their employers. The cards, to be printed in Spanish, encourage workers to obtain certain information about their employers in case they need to contact them later.

"If you look at the different things we did during the the meeting you can see that the commission is not here to serve just one group," Commissioner Irma Rodriguez said. "We have to be sensitive to all the groups, whether they are disabled, women, senior citizens, gay, Asian or Hispanic."