

# Plans Made to Reduce Tensions Over Killing

## Human Relations Panel Cites Public Reaction to Police Shooting of Child

By MAURA DOLAN, Times Staff Writer

Citing a "volatile" public reaction to the fatal shooting two weeks ago of a 5-year-old boy by a Stanton police officer, the Orange County Human Relations Commission on Friday unveiled plans intended to ease potential tensions between Stanton police and community members, improve police procedures and expand child-care services.

Irma Rodriguez, commission chairwoman, told a news conference that the commission will arrange to have Stanton police meet with residents of the neighborhood where the child was killed, ask the Orange County Grand Jury to review the police procedures used in the shooting and urge the Board of Supervisors to make child care a higher priority for county and federal money.

Patrick Andrew Mason, who had been left alone while his mother worked, was killed March 3 by a Stanton police officer who had been sent to the boy's residence after a caller told police she had been unable to contact the occupants—a mother and her child—for two weeks.

Police said the caller told them the child had not been in school for two weeks and the caller added that she had not been able to reach the youngster's mother.

While searching the apartment, Officer Anthony Sperl, 24, found the boy in a

darkened room, mistook a toy gun the child held for a real weapon and fired a single, fatal shot. The child's mother, Patricia Ridge, 29, told police she had left the boy alone because she could not afford a baby sitter and could not reach a friend who had promised to baby-sit for free.

Rodriguez said the commission decided to step in after reading emotional letters to newspapers about the incident and hearing angry, concerned statements from leaders of the Orange County chapter of the National Assn. for the Advancement of Colored People. The victim was black; Sperl is white.

"Obviously, the situation is volatile," Rodriguez said. "People are concerned, upset and there's a lot of fear."

The commission, created by county supervisors to investigate causes of tension and discrimination and recommend ways to eliminate them, will canvass the neighborhood where the shooting occurred next week to urge residents to attend a community meeting, where they can vent their emotions and ask questions, Rodriguez said. A meeting with police will follow, she added.

The commission will also ask the grand jury to review the procedures Sperl followed the evening of the shooting and recommend any changes that might prevent such a situation

from reoccurring, Rodriguez said. She declined to comment on the police methods that were used in the shooting.

Police said that Sperl entered the locked apartment with a passkey he obtained from the apartment manager. After hearing a noise coming from a bedroom where the child had been left, Sperl became "panicky," kicked in the door and shot the boy, police said. The officer did not call for a backup.

Rodriguez, citing estimates that 800,000 children in the United States are left at home every day without adult supervision, said Orange County can not meet the demands for subsidized child care. Some programs have huge waiting lists of over a year, she said.

She said the commission will prepare a report suggesting ways to provide more day care, such as using vacant schools or seeking employer-provided services, and present it to the supervisors.

The Orange County Grand Jury is expected to investigate the shooting this month. Authorities said that Sperl and Ridge each could face indictments for involuntary homicide or second-degree murder if the jurors determine that Sperl failed to perform his duty with "due caution and circumspection" or that Ridge placed her son in a life-endangering situation by leaving him alone.

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