
Orange County Perspective

Continuing the Struggle to Help Women

■ Despite Cuts, Human Relations Commission Has Taken on Other, Important Duties

The Orange County Human Relations Commission now does double duty: its own work and that of the county Commission on the Status of Women, which was disbanded by the Board of Supervisors last August amid budgetary cutbacks. It hasn't been easy.

Much is being left undone. For example, good work might have been accomplished if the commission had been operating at the time of the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings last fall. It was the perfect occasion to answer inquiries and otherwise help women who had questions about sexual harassment in their own lives. Those are missed opportunities that can't be recovered.

Still, within the confines of its own severe budgetary reductions, the Human Relations Commission is doing its best to maintain projects aimed primarily at women. That's hearten-

ing because women's issues must not be set aside; they are too important, not just to individual women but to the families the women represent.

Rusty Kennedy, executive director of the Human Relations Commission, said that among the programs he oversees that especially benefit women are a loan project for very small businesses, many of which are run by women, and parent leadership workshops, which are mostly attended by mothers. The commission also helps review domestic violence crimes and fields telephone calls from women seeking personal help, including women seeking shelter or trying to escape violence in their own homes. In addition, a new state law that defines some crimes against women as "hate crimes" should bring more women's issues under the purview of the Human Relations Commission.

The commission itself is made up of

nine women and three men, so, members say, women's issues are given a high priority. The panel is also forming a nonprofit council to find private funding for specific programs, including women's programs. That's needed because the commission's staff has also been slashed from six to three, with those remaining handling many of the activities once handled by the three-employee women's commission office.

The situation is not ideal, but things could get even worse if the county's budgetary picture doesn't improve; the Human Relations Commission itself could get axed, and its many good programs left to volunteers to administer. Who knows what opportunities would be lost then?

The Human Relations Commission is doing its best with limited resources. We urge it to continue paying special attention to women's issues and filling in the gap.