

Orange County Voices

COMMENTARY ON SOCIAL HARMONY

Need for Human Relations Commission Is Greater Than Ever



As minority populations grow, police depend more heavily on the agency, which the county should not disband.

By PAUL WALTERS

As police chief of the city of Santa Ana, I cannot overstate the importance of the Human Relations Commission. The commission is a key ingredient in the fostering of harmony and understanding in culturally diverse Orange County.

During the past 20 years, the minority population of Orange County has more than tripled. According to all indicators, this sociological trend will continue. The necessity of an Orange County Human Relations Commission is now greater than ever. This need will surely increase as our county continues to grow.

The commission has accomplished great strides in easing misunderstanding and tension within our diverse neighborhoods. By promoting positive interethnic dialogue, encouraging cooperative community involvement and working diligently with police agencies, much has been achieved.

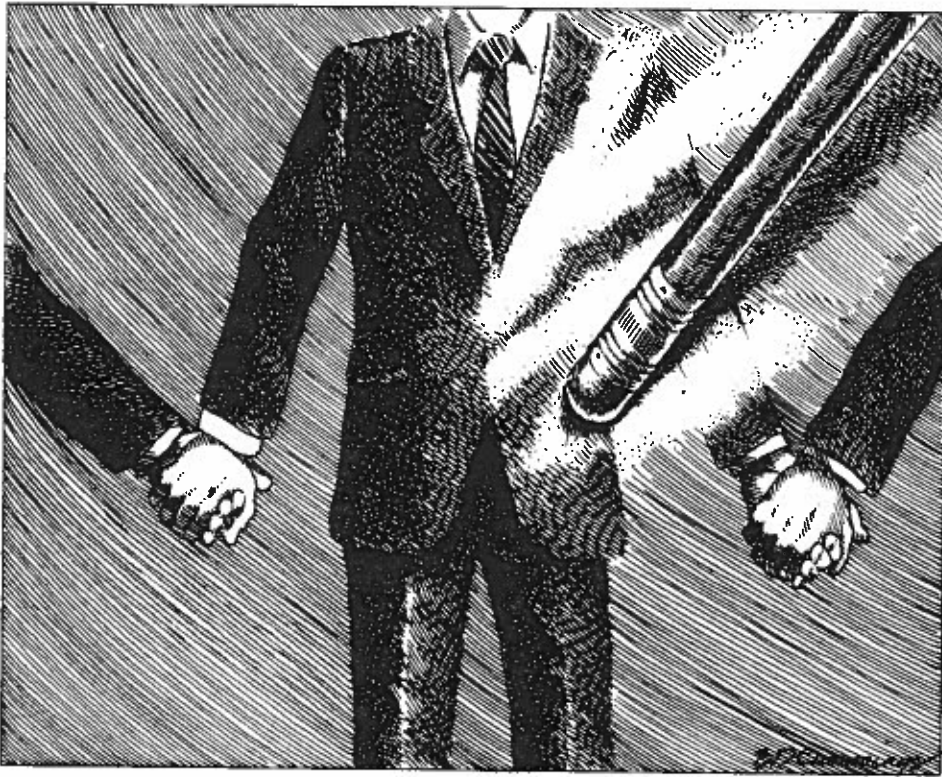
Orange County's police departments are dedicated to maintaining the highest standard of service to their respective communities. The Santa Ana Police Department reflects this philosophy by the practical application of our focus on community-oriented policing. The Human Relations Commission is an integral component to the support of this policing style throughout the county.

Community policing emphasizes a departmentwide philosophy oriented toward solving problems, rather than responding to individual incidents. To have a better understanding of neighborhood issues and priorities, officers must interact with the residents on a routine basis. This dialogue helps develop a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship between the police and the community that will ensure police accountability and promote a better understanding of the criminal justice system.

The major role of the Human Relations Commission is prevention. This approach provides a collaborative effort with local police departments' proactive efforts to maintain order, prevent crime and make Orange County a safer place to live and work.

While there are many effective examples from which I could choose, one very successful commission project was the conference on "New Perspectives, Police/Southeast Asian Relations in Orange County." Three Orange County police departments are primarily involved in servicing the largest concentration of Vietnamese in the United States. These immigrants and refugees bring with them many of their own traditions and customs. This creates a very difficult situation for police officers, who are daily combatting crime and providing service to people of an unfamiliar culture.

The Orange County Human Relations Commission, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Justice Community Relations Service, responded to the situation by sponsoring the "New Perspectives"



conference last September in Garden Grove. Three local police departments, Garden Grove, Westminster and Santa Ana, along with several community organizations, joined in organizing the event for the purpose of building police/Southeast Asian relations and working together on several of the county's issues.

This united effort proved highly worthwhile. The conference provided the police and the community with a background on Southeast Asian immigration

and adaptation to America and covered important historical perspectives on crime and police practices in Southeast Asia. Highlights of programs that have been successful in addressing immigrant-related issues were also presented.

The conference made recommendations regarding the future and how we might enhance our efforts in these important and sensitive areas of police relations. These recommendations are the essence of community-oriented policing programs.

Police agencies gain valuable input from the Human Relations Commission. Working together has facilitated trust and acceptance between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve.

Police are most effective when they have an understanding of the values of the people they serve. Community-oriented policing programs, coupled with this understanding, are extremely valuable in the prevention of fear and crime. The commission is paramount in assisting the police in this important effort.

Understandably, the Board of Supervisors must make budget cuts. Orange County residents are well aware of fiscal constraints. However, with regard to the much-needed Human Relations Commission, I advocate a compromise in lieu of total disbandment as a more viable solution. Rather than complete elimination, a proportional percentage adjustment should be made.

I propose that the smaller commission on the Status of Women (also targeted for elimination by the supervisors) be combined with the Human Relations Commission, thus affording both commissions the opportunity to continue their important work in a more cost-effective manner.

If Orange County is to continue to flourish and to prosper, it will need to meet and solve numerous future challenges. One such formidable challenge will be to provide an atmosphere that promotes unity among its diverse peoples. The continuing contributions of the Human Relations Commission will most assuredly assist in achieving this goal.

Paul Walters is police chief in Santa Ana.