

4 Sun., Sept. 20, 1970 R

Los Angeles Times *

Human Relation Units: Can They Do the Job?

Critics Say Fullerton, Santa Ana Panels Unqualified to Deal With Radical Demands

BY HERMAN WONG

Times Staff Writer

The old man stood up proudly to relish a rare moment in his life. He was telling city hall off.

His complaints depicted a Santa Ana municipal government devoid of compassion for the fate of low-income families that have been or are being displaced by city street widening and similar public projects.

A handful of other residents in the same audience—at first gingerly, then loudly and heatedly—detailed what they felt were acts of a bureaucracy desensitized by codes and rulebooks.

Their forum was a recent meeting of the city's Human Relations Commission in an aging, north-central Santa Ana neighborhood that is predominantly Mexican-American.

Although the audience that night numbered only 18 persons, their reactions ranging from sullenness to show-me curiosity were typical of larger turnouts at earlier meetings of the newly formed commission and a predecessor study committee.

Both the commission and the audience at the tiny Logan neighborhood center were feeling each other out, carefully sifting every phrase and gesture for signs that the gap between city government and the community was becoming less formidable.

"I think we've made a lot of headway here tonight," said the commission's chairman, the Rev. Galal Gough. "I think we all learned something here tonight."

The commission that night called for a comprehensive city study on how Santa Ana can help displaced families find other low-rent housing and adoption of a new city policy to implement that change.

The Santa Ana City Council Sept. 8 approved the commission resolution in principle. A move hailed

by commission members as setting the stage for vigorous action to fully define and then attack that housing problem.

To Mr. Gough and others, this whole sequence represents what they feel should be the direction of any human relations commission if it is to survive the emotionalism, polarization and inertia that have crippled or destroyed similar panels.

That direction, they maintain, is to establish the commission's role as primarily a fact-finding catalyst, not that of an accusatory, solely investigative body.

It is an operational style already being embraced by the first such government body in Orange County—the Fullerton Human Relations Commission established in May, 1969.

Private Groups

And it is expected to be the framework for any county human relations commission, should the Board of Supervisors decide to create one after a study just under way by representatives of the county, Orange County League of Cities and various private organizations.

But many critics in government and minority communities remain unimpressed by the Fullerton and Santa Ana commissions—although they acknowledge that each panel is in a fledgling stage—and the prospect of a countywide commission.

"I don't deny the sincerity of most of the people behind this kind of thing," said one government administrator, who doubts any commission can keep check on radical demands for swift social change or angry forays to investigate police and other departments.

"I'm afraid what they'll end up with is just another place for harassing us without anyone really sit-



Mrs. Marjorie Weed
Times photo

ting down to work with us, not against us."

Several minority critics who are close observers of human relations programs view the commissions as already cut adrift from the minority communities—those areas which are the top priority target of any commission in dealing with housing, employment, education, health, law enforcement and other fields.

Characteristic of this line of criticism is the kind aimed at the commission established in December, 1969, in Santa Ana—the city with the county's largest minority population (20% of a 155,000 population) and usually regarded as having the lowest boiling point for violence.

"They (the commission and earlier study committee) had a few meetings here and went back to city hall and stayed there," said one Mexican-American organizer. "They should come out here more, talk to the people. That's where they belong."

A young black man who is a liaison worker in southwest Santa Ana, put it this way:

"Look at the membership of that board. It's the same old people, the same ones who were on those other committees that didn't do a damn thing for us."

"To a lot of people, especially young people, it's just a lot of bull."

Such is the climate for a proposed county human relations commission with conditions ranging from high optimism that a commission can be a strong compassionate yet objectively based panel to one of distrust and hostility



Rev. Galal Gough

depicting such a panel as having built-in failure.

But the strongest advocates maintain that because of this confused, skeptical and tense climate, the need for human relations commissions has never been more urgent. Nor the timing.

"We still have the time to talk things out, when people are still willing to listen," said Manuel Mendez, an Anaheim architect, who is president of the privately formed Human Relations Council of Orange County.

"It's folly to argue that there is no need for such panels in Orange County. Do we need violent outbreaks, like those in Los Angeles, to prove that we do? The name of this game is prevention."

"It's not our intent to go out and point the finger at people and engage in name calling. For we realize that racist practices can be unintentional, that it can be the product of the system, such as the legal structure perpetuating housing and hiring discrimination."

It was the appeal by the Human Relations Council of Orange County, the League of Women Voters and other community organizations that led to a preliminary study ordered last spring by the Board of Supervisors.

Function Surveyed

In his Aug. 25 report to supervisors, County Administrative Officer Robert Thomas surveyed the functions, budgets and other mechanics of several county and municipal human relations commissions in California, including the Fullerton and Santa Ana city panels.

Thomas recommended

that the supervisors turn over any human relations functions to the Community Action Council, the county's officially endorsed agency for operating federally financed anti-poverty programs.

The supervisors instead took one of the alternatives listed—but not recommended—by Thomas by ordering a 90-day "task force" study on establishing a commission, including recommendations on powers, membership, budget and possible staffing.

Why an official county human relations commission? The question arises in view of the many privately organized groups in human relations and social action and the option of cities to form their own panels.

Direct Clout

For one thing, backers argue, an official county body will have the direct clout and commitment of the Board of Supervisors and county departments which are, in the final analysis, the agents for social change.

Secondly, they say that the enormous problems of alleviating discrimination, bureaucratic overlap and aloofness and loosely coordinated public and private agencies will more often than not require a countywide attack.

"It's a question of problems that are clearly countywide in scope and that no one city can successfully cope with," said Mrs. Marjorie Weed of Newport Beach, who was 1969 Grand Jury foreman.

"There are problems that simply do not stop at the city borders."

Low-Rent Housing

One frequently cited problem in this category is how much low-rent housing will ultimately be provided by the projected City of Irvine, a pattern with profound consequences on cities already struggling with problems of adequate low-rent housing and decaying core areas.

Not everyone agrees with the countywide concept of a human relations panel.

One such opponent is Santa Ana's police chief,

Edward Grand noted a county force as essential one that dabbles
Please T

The Ho
EXCLUSIV

Human Relation Units: Can They Do the Job?

"It's folly to argue that there is no need for such panels in Orange County. Do we need violent outbreaks, like those in Los Angeles, to prove that we do? The name of this game is prevention.

"It's not our intent to go out and point the finger at people and engage in name calling. For we realize that racist practices can be unintentional, that it can be the product of the system, such as the legal structure perpetuating housing and hiring discrimination."

It was the appeal by the Human Relations Council of Orange County, the League of Women Voters and other community organizations that led to a preliminary study ordered last spring by the Board of Supervisors.

Function Surveyed

In his Aug. 25 report to supervisors, County Administrative Officer Robert Thomas surveyed the functions, budgets and other mechanics of several county and municipal human relations commissions in California, including the Fullerton and Santa Ana city panels.

Thomas recommended

that the supervisors turn over any human relations functions to the Community Action Council, the county's officially endorsed agency for operating federally financed anti-poverty programs.

The supervisors instead took one of the alternatives listed—but not recommended—by Thomas by ordering a 90-day "task force" study on establishing a commission, including recommendations on powers, membership, budget and possible staffing.

Why an official county human relations commission? The question arises in view of the many privately organized groups in human relations and social action and the option of cities to form their own panels.

Direct Clout

For one thing, backers argue, an official county body will have the direct clout and commitment of the Board of Supervisors and county departments which are, in the final analysis, the agents for social change.

Secondly, they say that the enormous problems of alleviating discrimination, bureaucratic overlap and aloofness and loosely coordinated public and private agencies will more often than not require a county-wide attack.

"It's a question of problems that are clearly countywide in scope and that no one city can successfully cope with," said Mrs. Marjorie Weed of Newport Beach, who was 1969 Grand Jury foreman.

"There are problems that simply do not stop at the city borders."

Low-Rent Housing

One frequently cited problem in this category is how much low-rent housing will ultimately be provided by the projected City of Irvine, a pattern with profound consequences on cities already struggling with problems of adequate low-rent housing and decaying core areas.

Not everyone agrees with the countywide concept of a human relations panel.

One such opponent is Santa Ana's police chief Edward Allen, who was bitterly critical of a 1969 Grand Jury report that noted a serious communications gap between his force and the minority communities.

Allen pictures such a county citizens' panel as essentially an outsider and one that may be prone to dabbling in local matters.

Please Turn to Pg. 5, Col. 1

even if the panel lacked firsthand knowledge of the local situation.

"I would resent someone from Newport Beach or any other city coming in here and sitting in judgment on us like that," said Allen.

"It is the height of arrogance and presumption for them to feel that they are the only ones with compassion and concern and that we are doing nothing."

The 1969 Grand Jury was among those groups recommending that the Board of Supervisors establish a county human relations commission.

The same appeal has come from the Santa Ana and Fullerton city commissions—both of which have been quietly getting their bearings after a great deal of fanfare.

The 11-member Fullerton panel and the 15-member one in Santa Ana both proclaim equal opportunity and human dignity as the overriding principles in any human relations program.

As outlined in the ordinances establishing these appointive commissions, the means consist of providing forums to identify problems and solutions, hearing grievances, recommending legislation, coordinating other agencies, building communications between government and community and initiating educational and research projects.

Accent on Forums

The accent has been on staging forums as prologues to recommending legislation or new policies for the city.

The Fullerton commission thus far has won City Council endorsement of resolutions calling for open housing and equal employment and a study on city hiring practices.

"We see ourselves as being primarily an educational and persuasive group, not one of enforcement or solely for hearing complaints," said Mrs. Gwen Ferguson, Fullerton commission chairman.

The Santa Ana commission's resolution on the plight of hunger, as well as the more recent one on displaced low-income families, has been endorsed by its City Council.

Closer Ties

Both commissions also have been meeting with departmental officials to lay groundwork for closer ties and to allay fears of commission interference. And probably most of all to avoid an image that the commissions would bypass departments in handling grievances and become controversial departmental review boards.

While the hearing of and checking into grievances remain a significant task for the two city commissions, it has been downplayed.

"We aim at being positive and constructive," said Mr. Gough, the Santa Ana commission chairman. "We don't intend to become preoccupied with grievances."

Grievances against the Santa Ana police continue to be routed directly to the Police Department, often referred by individual commission members or community relations units

in the department or the city manager's office.

Lt. Robert Stebbins, the department's community relations officer since that post was created two years ago, says the most serious grievances—such as harassment or discrimination—still come from the minority communities.

Stebbins maintains that the department's own grievance machinery and, if needed, disciplinary procedures are adequate to handle these grievances without resorting to a human relations commission.

"We realize there are people who will not accept this as being true," said Stebbins. "But we are as much concerned as anyone in trying to keep our own house clean."

But many commission proponents doubt the merits of an in-house evaluation by the police or any other government agency.

"It may attempt to have the most objective study in the world but the people in the community won't accept it as being valid and not one-sided," said Richard Baisden, UC

Irvine extension director and former president of the Community Action Council.

Negro critics say that relations between the black community in particular and the Santa Ana police have deteriorated in wake of charges of harassment following the fatal shooting of police officer Nelson Sasscer in June, 1969, in southwest Santa Ana.

They argue that the tension has not subsided and that the positions of Stebbins and that of Robert Portillo, the community relations aide to the city manager, are regarded as figureheads.

"We need a human relations program that is truly strong enough to do something and want to do something," said Clarence Jackson, local N A A C P chapter president. "The day of passing the buck and pacifying is over."

Although they cite the small staff and overly high community expectations for their units, both Stebbins and Portillo feel they have gained ground in opening a city pipeline into the minority communities and that their chief tasks are educational, not as grievance officers.

Portillo, a former probation and parole officer, took over his post in May, 1969, after a months-long study by the Santa Ana City Council on a human relations program.

His budget for 1970-71 is \$44,000, which includes one field assistant.

Neither the Santa Ana commission nor the Fullerton commission has a regular operating budget. Neither has a staff of its own.

It is widely accepted that any commission to be truly effective needs a full-time director and staff—a point strongly emphasized

in the county administrative office's report to the Board of Supervisors.

The most pressing questions facing the proposed county human relations commission are the same facing the two city panels—how far-ranging, how fast and how outspoken should the commission be.

Most commission proponents view the course as a delicate one down the middle, working well within the governmental structure but not afraid to use a big stick as a last resort and to seek social change with reasonable patience and armed with factual knowledge.

And they do not expect to convince the extreme critics both in government and in the community.

"We want to win over the 80% and show them it can work," said attorney Jerry Patterson, a Santa Ana city councilman. "We may even fail but we will have tried and learned a great deal.

"It isn't a question of let's go fight city hall. It should be this way: Why should people even have to fight city hall?"