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Relations Panel Forms Response to Rise in Anti-Muslim Crime

Community: The county commission adopts a three-part plan to address acts against residents who appear Middle Eastern.

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Meeting Thursday for the first time since the attacks on New York and the Pentagon, Orange County's Commission on Human Relations adopted a plan to respond to an increase in hate crimes.

Executive Director Rusty Kennedy said that since Sept. 11, the commission has taken 24 reports of hate crimes related to people thought to be of Middle Eastern descent.

"Twenty-four incidents is more than we have ever had targeting this community in any year," Kennedy said.

The commission's plan has three areas of emphasis, Kennedy said: responding to hate crimes, building understanding and raising awareness.

"Orange County Together: United We Stand" will be a long-term campaign, he said. The first event will be an Oct. 25 forum, "When Fear Collides with Hate."

Speakers will include representatives of law-enforcement agencies and the Arab American community.

"We hope to raise awareness at this meeting and talk about how we can spread the word about how to bust up stereotypes," Kennedy said.

The goal of the forum will be to inform people about Islam and to emphasize that Muslims who follow a peaceful faith are not to be equated with terrorists who distort the religion to justify violence, Kennedy said.

The campaign will also include public service announcements and help for hate-crime victims. The assistance could include discussions with community members or even involvement in identifying perpetrators. Other areas of concern are radio talk shows that may have contributed to a reactionary climate, Kennedy said, and employment discrimination or lost jobs because of ethnicity.

The commission has received reports of Muslims being attacked, threatened, berated and mocked. It also received a complaint after the Sept. 27 fire at the Islamic Tandoori Restaurant in Anaheim.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations reports receiving 40 reports of hate-related incidents since Sept. 11.