

Better understanding is goal of meeting on ethnic diversity

SOCIAL ISSUES: Residents can call the live Orange County NewsChannel program to express their views.

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For the first time, residents are invited to a countywide discussion on a subject human-relations officials say is hushed all too often: the rapidly changing ethnic mix of Orange County.

And if there's one thing officials hope participants will gain from the town hall meeting organized by the Orange County NewsChannel, it's a better understanding of each other. The meeting is at 8 p.m. Wednesday in the University Center at California State University, Fullerton, 800 N. State College Blvd. It will be broadcast live on OCN.

"This is the beginning," said Pat Callahan, director of Irvine-based Orange County Together,

a joint project of the United Way and the Orange County Human Relations Commission. "We can get a Korean, a Hispanic, a black and a Vietnamese in the same room and say, 'Let's get to know each other.'"

Since 1980 the county has changed from 78 percent white into one of the nation's most ethnically diverse areas. Projections show continued gains in the Hispanic and Asian populations, leading to no ethnic majority early in the next decade.

Five panelists — including a high school freshman, a businessman and a college president — will lead the audience in a 90-minute discussion on how Orange County is coping with its changing population.

"I believe there's nothing more powerful than people talking to people," said Rusty Kennedy, director of the Human Relations Commission. "It's

through talking you overcome fears of the unknown."

Residents will be able to sign up for "living room dialogues" at the meeting.

The dialogues allow groups of 10 to 12 people with various ethnic backgrounds to share aspects of their cultures. Sometimes they tell joyful stories about their families. Sometimes they vent anger about the troubles they've had starting their lives in a new country.

At 7:30 p.m. Wednesday — a half hour before the town hall meeting — Kennedy will be on OCN to answer questions from callers. The OCN hot-line number is (800) CALL OCN.

In conjunction with the forum, The Orange County Register and its affiliated community newspapers will publish stories Thursday and Friday examining ethnic diversity on a countywide and city-by-city level.