

Press-Telegram

SERVING THE SOUTHLAND

Changes in families examined

By Robin Hinch
Staff writer

LONG BEACH — Nearly a year after initiating its ambitious Family Diversity Project, the Human Relations Commission has approved the final draft of its 100-page report, along with 63 recommendations for improving family life in the city.

"We are not making value judgments on every lifestyle nor advocating any lifestyle," said commission member Shirley Guy. "We are simply outlining reality and hoping to make city services reflect that reality in a more productive way."

Encompassing some aspect of nearly every need brought to the commission's attention during public hearings, the recommendations address a wide range of issues, from making more buildings wheelchair-accessible to including domestic partners in the city's definition of family.

The report, titled "Strengthening Family Relationships in Long Beach: An Assessment of Family Diversity in Community Life," was prepared by the Spectrum Institute in Los Angeles, a non-profit agency that conducted a similar project for the city of Los Angeles two years ago. It is based on more than 12 hours of public testimony gathered at three hearings held last summer.

Those testifying made it clear that families today are no longer just mom, dad and the two kids. They are grandmothers raising children, lesbian and gay parents, single mothers and fathers, foster parents, domestic partners and other adults, related or not, who share a home.

Regardless of family structure, similar needs were cited: more and better child care; better community access for disabled people; more services for seniors; more tolerance and accommodation of diverse lifestyles.

"The idea of family was never meant to be a one-size-fits-all mandate for controlling the private lives of citizens," says the report. "Nor in our diverse and pluralistic society was it meant to be a tool to punish nonconformance. The city's interest in families is not that they be alike, but that they work."

The Family Diversity Project was designed to define family life in Long Beach and assess how well the city is meeting its families' needs.

"We're not trying to scold people," said Don Fancher, chairman of the commission. "We commend much of what the city is doing. But we feel it needs help in order to do more."

A final version of the report will be presented to the City Council in March, along with a request that every effort be made to implement some of the recommendations.

"The real tragedy," said Fancher, "would be for the City Council simply to receive and file this."

"Some of the recommendations will cost the city nothing," pointed out Guy, "because they are simply policy changes. Others are a matter of shifting the way you do business. This report sets up Long Beach as a model, and it will be up to the City Council to set the priorities."

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"This report is central to carrying out our mandate, not because it favors any particular excluded group, but because it speaks up for everyone," concludes the report. "Our families give each of us a foundation and a refuge. No matter who we call our family, or what we call our home, we all share the need for someone to call family, someone to call home."

FAMILY:

Changed patterns studied

L.B.'s report on family diversity

Here are a few of the 63 recommendations being made in the Long Beach Human Relations Commission's Family Diversity report:

- Examination of all city ordinances, rules and regulations using the word "family" to see if they include all family forms.

- Creation of a Mayor's Fund for Childcare.

- Pursuit of private foundation and government funds to increase available and affordable child care.

- Strengthening of the city's regulations regarding employment discrimination based on

sexual orientation.

- Survey of public facilities to be sure they are handicapped-accessible.

- Designation of city ombudsman to work as liaison between the city and the disability community.

- Inclusion of domestic partnerships in city definition of family for purposes of employee benefits, as well as sick and family leaves.

- School district adoption of Project 10, a campus counseling and information service for gay and lesbian high school students.

- Expansion of youth pro-

grams and provision of outreach funds for alternatives to gang life, including recreation programs, counseling and family education.

- Outreach to Asian communities to inform them of housing discrimination laws.

- More aggressive monitoring of housing discrimination based on marital status, family size and sexual orientation.

- Development of an AIDS education program directed at families.

- Development of respite care programs for those who care for elderly people or those with AIDS.