

Florio praises county plan for bias crime

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FREEHOLD TOWNSHIP — Gov. Florio yesterday praised the fledgling Monmouth County Human Relations Commission as a comprehensive and pro-active response to a simmering climate of bigotry and hatred that has not yet boiled over.

"We want to make sure we try to arrest some of these tendencies we're starting to see in New Jersey," he said, citing a recent cross burning in his home county of Camden. "I may be sending folks from other counties to chat with you."

Florio's comments followed a report by Monmouth County Prosecutor John Kaye and second assistant prosecutor Robert A. Honecker Jr. that the number of reported bias-related incidents has risen steadily since the prosecutor's office began keeping such statistics in 1988. There were 48 incidents in 1988, 62 in 1989 and 79 so far this year, Honecker and Kaye said.

Five bias crimes happened in the county in the past week, Kaye said. A vehicle and parking space belonging to an unidentified man in Aberdeen Township were defaced by swastikas, two anti-Russian letters were received by unidentified Ocean Township residents, and an anti-Semitic letter was received by an unidentified Rumson resident, Kaye said.

Neither the prosecutor's office nor the local police departments could provide any further details late yesterday afternoon.

Kaye said bias-related incidents are prevalent in October.

"Our history shows us that this pre-Halloween season will be full of this stuff," he said, adding that most of the activity is done by juveniles.

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THOMAS P. COSTELLO/Asbury Park Press

Gov. Florio (center) listens to committee report during Monmouth County Human Relations Commission meeting in Freehold Township yesterday afternoon. Freeholder Theodore J. Narozanick (left) and commission Chairman David Cohen also listen.

The commission, a broad-based coalition of community leaders that took shape in April and is still in its formative stage, intends to examine such incidents and their causes and develop programs to educate schoolchildren and others about the importance of community diversity and mutual respect. It is the first county commission of its kind in New Jersey, and Florio said his office is trying to encourage other counties to follow Monmouth's lead.

One of the commission's subcommittees, headed by Monmouth County Superintendent of Schools Milton G. Hughes and Louis Paparozzi, director of the county Department of Human Services, is examining the feasibility of

producing an anti-bias videotape for schools in conjunction with the Mental Health Players, a dramatic group, and Brookdale Community College, Middletown Township.

Florio, who attended the commission's meeting at the county's Special Services building for about an hour, said he was pleased by the emphasis on schoolchildren.

He said his wife, Lucinda, a former third-grade teacher, told him, "You don't have to worry about getting to children too early. You have to worry about getting to them too late."

As Florio was leaving, he told reporters, "You almost feel (young people) haven't got an understanding of how hurting spray paint can be."

The commission also plans to set up an anti-bias hot line, operating out of Paparozzi's office, by the end of the year, and is considering developing an emergency response team to work with local police to ease community tension after a bias incident takes place or before one can occur.