

Homicides spur creation of police unit

Mayor says members would cover violent-crime areas, also wants to hire officers

By John Zucal
Managing Editor

In the light of two homicides during the past 10 days, city police personnel will be moved into a new unit which city officials said is designed to patrol high-crime areas.

Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. and police officials said Sept. 1 a new Street Crimes Unit would be formed. Members of the unit, said the mayor, would be selected from officers who would be considered the most active on duty.

The unit's creation follows the deaths of two men on consecutive evenings to close August.

• Kelyr Pierre-Jules, 23, of Orange died Aug. 30 after he was found at approximately 8 p.m. in the area of 147 Cleveland St. He died shortly after he arrived at University Hospital.

An autopsy determined blunt-force trauma as the cause of death, which law enforcement personnel said often means a physical assault.

• One night later, city resident Hameek Thomas, 18, was shot in the 200 block of Cleveland Street. Thomas was taken to University Hospital, where he died at approximately 3:30 a.m. on Sept. 1.

A spokeswoman with the Essex County Prosecutor's Office said an early investigation showed Hameek's death may have been the result of a targeted shooting.

In an interview last week, Hawkins said it was clear stronger action was needed in areas where levels of violent crime where increased.

"Last night I saw a young man with two bullets in his head. Enough is enough," said Hawkins, referring to the

Hameek death. "Criminals must now know that if they want to commit a crime in Orange, they will be swiftly apprehended and punished. That's if they're not stopped and arrested in advance."

In response to concerns about the unit's staffing, Hawkins said regular coverage initially would come from overtime but expressed optimism the Police Department would be able to hire officers who experienced layoffs in other municipalities.

Under state law, that would allow the officers to begin active duty immediately instead of requiring recruits to go through six months of academy training.

Hawkins stressed that all police officers the city laid off earlier this year have been rehired, so hires in this round would come from outside the city.