



## **Federal civil rights panel to discuss ‘stand your ground’ law**

By Jeff Weiner  
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ORLANDO, Fla. — The fatal shooting of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford ignited a nationwide debate on gun rights, profiling and Florida’s controversial self-defense laws.

That debate continues Friday, when a panel of experts convene in Orlando to discuss the “stand your ground” law, as part of an investigation the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights launched after the teen’s death became a cause celebre.

Michael Yaki, one of eight appointed commissioners on the panel, said in an interview Thursday at the Rosen Plaza Hotel that Central Florida was a natural place to discuss those laws.

Florida was the first state to adopt “stand your ground,” and Martin’s killing shone a harsh light on it.

“We came to Orlando, because in some ways, it was ground zero for this discussion and debate,” Yaki said.

“Stand your ground” laws grant immunity from prosecution to those who use deadly force to prevent imminent death or great bodily harm, without any duty to first try to retreat from the danger.

Martin’s shooter, George Zimmerman, said the unarmed Miami Gardens teen had attacked him and was beating him when he opened fire. Authorities didn’t initially arrest Zimmerman, citing his self-defense claim.

Though Zimmerman’s lawyers disputed that the controversial law played a role in his acquittal at trial last year, the case renewed debate about the application of self-defense laws, in Florida and elsewhere.

The Commission’s stated goal is to assess “whether there is possible racial bias in the assertion, investigation and/or enforcement of justifiable homicide laws in states with Stand Your Ground provisions.”

Yaki said the probe also aims to reassure the public that their concerns about the law are being heard.

“I think that us coming in ... makes people understand that they’re not alone and someone is actually being serious about taking a good hard look at how these laws act and how these laws are applied,” he said.

Yaki said there is not set a deadline to complete the inquiry, which will use its findings in Florida, where some of the best data exists, as a “model for analysis for other states as well.”

“This is a nationwide study; this is not just about what’s happened in Florida,” he said.

(EDITORS: STORY CAN END HERE)

More than a dozen experts are expected to testify before the commission, on topics ranging from the personal impact of “stand your ground” laws, to the role of race in their implementation by authorities.

Among those slated to speak Friday:

Ahmad Nabil Abuznaid, an attorney for the Dream Defenders, who held a monthlong sit-in at the Florida Capitol after Zimmerman’s acquittal.

Elizabeth Burke, managing attorney for the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence, a nonprofit gun control advocacy group.

David LaBahn, president of the Association of Prosecuting Attorneys, a national think tank for prosecutors.

Ilya Shapiro, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based national libertarian think tank.

Ronald S. Sullivan Jr., a professor at Harvard Law School who specializes in criminal law, legal ethics and racial issues in the criminal justice system.

U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, established by the Civil Rights Act of 1957, is a fact-finding agency tasked with studying potential rights violations, discrimination and the enforcement of civil rights laws.