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Albert Dickson / The Hartford Courant

■ About 40 people took part in a rally in Hartford Friday to protest the response of police to the drowning of 14-year-old Lydia Benitez, whose body was found by relatives and friends July 11 in the

Farmington River. At left, Eddie DiPini, Lydia's father, comforts his son George DiPini, 9, while some of Lydia's friends and relatives weep at right.

Marchers protest response to drowning

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There were more officers than demonstrators Friday at a rally to protest the police response to the drowning of a 14-year-old Hispanic girl from Hartford.

The 40 demonstrators started their march at Bushnell Park and ended at the Superior Court building, chanting "Free the Benitez defendants." Lawyers and court employees watched the demonstrators, who were photographed by officers in plain clothes.

The defendants are the nine people charged with inciting a riot July 11, the day 14-year-old Lydia Benitez's body was found in the Farmington River. They were among about 100 people who clashed with police when they arrived at St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center in Hartford with Lydia's body.

During the clash, several people were hit with nightsticks and sprayed with pepper spray. A security guard and an emergency room technician were assaulted.

Family members and friends found Lydia's body in the river three days after she disappeared while swimming with friends. They have been outspoken in their criticism of Bloomfield and state police, saying that they

did not do enough to find the girl's body.

State police insist they made a full and professional effort to find the body under difficult circumstances.

Hartford Assistant Police Chief Joseph Ward said officials feared that Friday's rally would be a repeat of the melee at the hospital. That's why about 50 city and state police as well as officers from the Capitol guarded the rally route and courthouse Friday.

"We didn't know what to expect," Ward said. "We were told that several hundred people were expected."

The police were stationed along the route and about 20 officers were visible as the marchers turned at Lafayette Street to head toward the courthouse.

On Thursday, the Capitol police issued a memo advising state employees of the rally and saying that it would likely include street gang members.

"We would advise you to take note of these happenings and plan your walks, lunch and travel accordingly," the memo said, in part. It also advised employees to park their cars in the garage.

The 11:30 a.m. rally was under control for the entire two hours. Those who marched carried signs that read "Stop police brutality" and

"No justice, no peace."

"I don't see any gang people here today," said state Rep. Ilia J. Castro, D-Hartford. "These are professional working people. This is another example how the institutions prejudice us as hysterical people who become violent."

"This is just a peaceful protest," said Castro, who marched with demonstrators from Bushnell Park to Main Street, and on to Park Street, where they turned onto Lafayette Street to protest in front of the Superior Court.

The rally was organized by the Hispanic Health Council, which has allied itself with other community-based groups to initiate an independent investigation into the police response to the drowning.

Some people in the Hispanic community say the effort to find Lydia's body was lax. They say police and hospital officials showed little respect and sensitivity in helping the family the day Lydia's body was found and taken to the hospital by friends.

As demonstrators marched, they chanted: "Stop the war against the poor." Onlookers, who asked demonstrators what the march was about, nodded their heads when demonstrators yelled back: "Para la nena [For the little girl]."