

The Child Care Initiative - Sydney Bar Model

By *Rashda Rana*

Exactly a year ago this month, the Equal Opportunity Committee commenced the pilot of the Child Care Initiative - Sydney Bar Model (so-called because it is a novel initiative). The pilot concluded at the end of the Bar year 2003. The initiative was assessed by Jane Smyth of Smyth & Associates at the beginning of this year. Her investigations concluded that the initiative was a resounding success and other than minor tweaking of the process, she recommended that the initiative be made available to the wider community of the Bar of NSW.

The recommendation, adopted by the EOC, was finally approved by Bar Council in late April 2004. That initiative is now open to all barristers and in the manner of economies of scale the initiative will become more efficient by greater use. I have personally responded to 10 inquiries since the announcement!

The following is a brief exposition of how the initiative is intended to operate. It is an initiative that had its foundation with the Bar Association but is not being operated by the Bar. Other than resolving a pressing problem for many barristers the Bar has no further involvement in the initiative. It is being operated by a service provider, McArthur Management. McArthur specialises in providing recruitment and human resources services in a number of specialist divisions including health and childcare services. The 'contract' for child care services will be between the barrister and McArthur. Hence, all communications and enquiries should be directed to McArthur Management (details below).

The initiative enables a barrister in an emergency (or when normal childcare arrangements fail) to make one telephone call to McArthur for help and McArthur can then make all the necessary arrangements for the carer to arrive at the barrister's home or collect the child as is required. The centralised telephone system operated by McArthur is a 24-hour service. McArthur will eventually have a comprehensive database supporting the facility containing the names, address, chambers address of the barrister parent, clerk, children's likes/dislikes, children's routine, etc, which assist in administering the scheme and which would also be available to the carer.

If, for example, a family member or usual carer calls in sick at 7am and the barrister is due in court at 10am, it is a requirement of McArthur's service under the scheme that the carer will be there to relieve the situation within an hour of the call. Similarly, the barrister may be caught unexpectedly at a hearing until 5.00 pm and is unable to meet prior arrangements to collect a child from daycare or to meet some other commitment in relation to the child that the barrister expected to be able to meet. In those circumstances, the barrister (or the barrister's clerk) can telephone McArthur to have the carer collect the child and do whatever is necessary to care for the child until the barrister becomes free from immediate professional obligations to meet domestic commitments.



Kate Guilfoyle and Jane Needham with their daughters Imogen and Stella
Photo: Wade Laube / Sydney Morning Herald

A key feature of the scheme is that the carer who is called in under this service will be someone who already knows the children of the barrister because of a regular periodic investment of some childcare time by the barrister's family with that carer. A regular engagement is necessary for the smooth running of the scheme. This is achieved by the barrister engaging the carer in a minimum of four hours per fortnight in some caring role with the children. This may be babysitting or some other child centered activity. The continuity of contact will ensure that the transition from the parent leaving for work and the carer arriving at the home goes smoothly and without causing any stress or anxiety for the parent, child or carer.

Families will be given a choice of carers matched to suit the needs of the family and the location of the home.

This is how the pilot was conducted and tested. It worked as was envisaged by all those who were involved in the organisation of the initiative and those who gracefully and voluntarily became guinea pigs for the pilot.

So far as the EOC is aware this is the first initiative of its kind in Australia. In recognition of this fact, the EOC is organizing a more formal launch on 10 June 2004 at 5.15pm at the Bar Common Room to which all interested members are invited. It will be an opportunity to meet members of McArthur, Jane Smyth and some of the participants in the pilot. Further details will be provided in due course.

Although the Bar Association has no ongoing involvement with the service, the web page will soon contain the relevant contact details for the scheme's administrators. In the meantime, should you want further information, please contact McArthur's direct on ph: 9252 0799 or fax 9252 1399 and ask for Corina Byers, Lisa Friggieri, Carli Norton, or Bernadette Dunn.