

**SOUTH CAROLINA BAR ASSOCIATION  
YOUNG LAWYER DIVISION**

**CHANGING ROOMS FOR CHILDREN PROJECT**

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**I. Project Description**

The Changing Rooms for Children Project was created by the South Carolina Bar Young Lawyers Division to help renovate the rooms in which children and parents meet for supervised visitation. As with many states, the Department of Social Services (“DSS”) is charged with overseeing supervised visitation between parents and children. Historically, the agency has only been able to provide the most basic of rooms for parents and children to meet. Most of the visitation rooms were cold and depressing, and most of the toys and books in the rooms were dilapidated. In response, the South Carolina Bar Young Lawyers Division sought contributions of home improvement and decorating supplies, furniture, books and toys from area businesses. With their help, the South Carolina Bar Young Lawyers Division transformed the visitation room into a warm and welcoming place for families to spend time together.

**II. Project Planning/Development**

**A. Identification of Need**

As a lawyer in South Carolina, one is obligated to accept appointments to pro bono cases each year. One of the most frequent appointments involves serving as a *guardian ad litem* for children in family court cases. Many lawyers commented on the poor conditions of the rooms in which the children had to meet with their parents for supervised visitation. The South Carolina Bar Young Lawyers Division heard about this problem and contacted DSS to discuss the prospect of allowing the Young Lawyers Division to renovate a visitation room in Columbia, South Carolina. DSS agreed and the Young Lawyers Division began preparing its plan of action.

**B. Determination of Project Goals and Design**

**1. Decisions to be made**

**a. Options - Project Goals**

The Project’s goal was to provide a happy, nurturing environment for families struggling with emotional, financial, and other problems. Since supervised visitation was often conducted under strained and artificial circumstances, it was important to make the rooms as comfortable and as “home-y” as possible. This, in turn, would help both the parents and children relax and interact with each other more naturally. The committee

also hoped that the Project would result in more meaningful visits for everyone and aid in the healing process for the families.

Although the committee started with one visitation room, the long-term goal was to be able to garner participation from Young Lawyers around the state and renovate visitation rooms in each county of the state. The Project was first implemented in the two (2) most populous counties in the state to ensure that there was a large pool of volunteers from which to recruit help. With the successful completion of a family waiting room in Richland County and two (2) visitation rooms in Charleston County, the Project is now slated to move to the upstate region of South Carolina. As a result of the great success of the first two (2) Changing Rooms, the committee is expecting to be able to complete three (3) additional visitation rooms this year, in Greenville, Spartanburg and Florence, South Carolina.

To effectuate such a large-scale undertaking, additional coordinators for the Project will be appointed in each of the new sites so that Committee members volunteering in each of the counties will have a “point person” to whom they can go for input, approval, and ideas. One chairperson will oversee the coordinators in each of the 3 counties. This structure was intended to reduce the likelihood of the chairperson having to incur travel expenses between the 3 sites. Although it may require one trip to each site, with the help of the 3 coordinators, the chairperson should be able to effectively monitor the progress of the Projects via e-mail and telephone conferences.

**b. Options - Project Design**

*Location, location, location.* The Committee first decided where the Project should be implemented. As noted above, Richland County was selected as the first site for the Project because of its wealth of active Young Lawyer volunteers. Since it is also the State capital and the county in which the Department of Social Services is based, it provided a prime location to open lines of communication and establish relationships between the Young Lawyers Division and the agency. The Committee also believed that if the Project were a success in Richland County, word about the Project would spread much faster to the smaller counties in the State, and it would be significantly easier to implement the Project in those counties in the future.

The ultimate goal of the Project, of course, was to move it throughout the State. Since it was a new, untested project, the Committee believed it would be better to start small, prove the Project worked, and segue smoothly to the next selected county. After completing the Changing Rooms Project in Richland County, the Project moved to Charleston

County and it was equally as successful. This year, 3 new counties have been selected to benefit from the Project. Like Richland and Charleston counties, the new sites for the Project have an active Young Lawyer Division base, which will ensure the continued success of the Project.

*Making the Connection.* Finding a contact at DSS was the next step in the Project design. The Committee needed to establish that first line of communication and sell the DSS on the Project. There was no particular person to whom such a request was to be made, so one of the co-chairs of the Committee began by making a blind telephone call to the DSS Director. After a few transfers, the co-chair found the DSS employee with the authority to grant the Committee's request to allow the Young Lawyers Division to renovate its supervised visitation room. Once this initial connection was made, the Committee could easily communicate its ideas with DSS and get any necessary approval before moving forward with each step of the Project.

This year, the Committee will utilize the contacts made through the Richland and Charleston County Changing Room Projects to make the connections with the new locations. This is expected to ease the transition into the next 3 counties.

*Identifying the Needs.* Next, the Committee had to meet with a DSS representative and view the visitation room. This provided the first glimpse of the drab and depressing conditions of the visitation room and the work that would need to be done. Paint was peeling, carpet was badly stained, and furniture was tattered. In addition, the toys with which the children played were either broken or were missing parts. Books had pages missing and the bindings were frayed. One attorney reported seeing a little girl playing with a doll that had no head. Although utterly unacceptable, it was not (and is not) uncommon. With state and local governments cutting their budgets, the Committee learned that these needs often go unaddressed. Many states and counties do not have the financial resources or the personnel to renovate their visitation rooms. This was a shock to many, but provided the Young Lawyers Division with a great opportunity to provide a service that state and local governments could not afford to provide.

The Committee mapped out the layout of the room, took measurements, and noted what problems in the room needed to be addressed. This provided the "punch list" of items that the Committee tackled during the Project. With a limited budget, prioritizing was key. Input from DSS was extremely helpful in that regard. The agency was able to help the Committee prioritize by identifying what factors were most important to the families that used the visitation rooms. The Committee could then

easily determine whether an extra piece of furniture was more or less important than purchasing a window treatment.

Although this year's Committee has not yet viewed the visitation rooms at the new sites, it anticipates they will suffer from the same disrepair as those in Richland and Charleston counties. With the additional coordinators and volunteers in each of the three new counties, however, the Committee expects to be able to transform each visitation rooms into a comfortable "home away from home."

*Selecting the Date.* One other consideration for the Committee was when to conduct the project. The most significant factors in selecting the date for the Project were trying to work with the schedules of the Committee members and avoiding interfering with scheduled supervised visitations. The Committee anticipated that it would take one to three days to complete the Project. In order to best accommodate everyone's schedule, the Committee opted to provide several prospective dates for the Project to be completed. This ensured that the Committee would receive the most participation from Committee members and reduced the chance of interfering with visitation schedules. The Committee also confirmed with other state bar committees that there would be no conflicts on the date(s) the Project was to take place.

Although a similar system will be implemented this year for selecting dates for the Project, the Committee expects that it will be somewhat more complicated simply because there are more sites to renovate. Great care will need to be used in cross-checking the Young Lawyers Division master calendar to ensure that there are no conflicts with the dates for the three Project sites. With the assistance of the South Carolina Bar staff and the Executive Council of the Young Lawyers Division, this should not present a problem.

*Supplies.* The next, and most significant step was to collect the supplies necessary to complete the Project. Home improvement supplies, including paint and carpet, as well as furniture, toys and books were needed to renovate the visitation room. The Committee only had a small budget, so it required contacting area businesses, like Lowe's, Home Depot, Toys R Us, and Rooms-to-Go, to try to obtain discounted prices for the materials. To accomplish this, Committee members were assigned specific businesses to contact. With the "leg work" divided among the Committee members, it made the collection process significantly easier. Committee members were requested to report to the Project chairperson the quantity and types of the supplies they collected. This provided the chairperson with a good overview of Project areas that were covered and those where more supplies would be needed. Where possible, desired colors were selected ahead of time. Some of the selections were changed subsequently

due to cost factors. Additionally, the Richland County Changing Rooms Committee applied for a grant, which enabled them to complete their Project and provided a “pipeline” source of funding for the Charleston County Project. The Charleston County Changing Rooms Committee also worked with the Junior League of Charleston, who purchased additional toys for the Project.

Supplies for the Project were to be maintained by the Committee member who collected them. On the day of the Project, each member brought his or her supplies to the site to complete the Project. Larger furniture items were simply scheduled for delivery to the site on the day of the Project.

The process for collecting supplies for this year’s Project will substantially follow this scheme. It is expected, however, that the Committee may be able to obtain greater discounts by purchasing items in bulk from one vendor for all three sites. This may present a challenge with respect to the transportation of the supplies to the Project site. Ideally, the Committee plans to try to have the vendor contact the store location nearest the Project site to see if similar merchandise is available. If not, the Committee plans to try to get the vendor to transfer the merchandise to the nearest store location, where Committee members can pick it up or arrange for delivery. If, however, the Committee is not successful in getting the supplies where they need to be by using the store’s assistance, the Committee will simply use its own resources – members – to help transport the supplies to the Project site. This year’s Committee has already secured a donation of books and artwork from local artists for the visitation rooms. Coordinators and Committee members will be calling in favors and using their contacts to help gather contributions for this year’s Project.

*Changing Rooms for Children.* Prior to the day of the Project, each Committee member was assigned to a particular part of the renovation process. The assignments covered the entire spectrum of do-it-yourself projects, including painting, carpet laying, furniture moving and placement, toy and book organization, picture hanging, and importantly, clean up. DSS also helped to provide some of the labor used to complete the Project. As noted above, it was important to map out the room prior to the Project and take good measurements. That guided the purchasing of furniture and other items that would need to fit in the space. Because of the time needed to dry and the potential mess, painting was first on the list for the renovation. Committee members taped walls, laid drop sheets, and began painting the room. Others moved furniture, books and toys out of the way. After the painting phase was completed and the room was cleared, new carpet was installed. Furniture was then brought in and set up. Once the paint was dry, any pictures were placed on the walls. Finally, the new toys and books were organized and arranged. The

Committee cleaned after each phase of the Project was completed, thus minimizing the mess to be cleaned at the end. Upon completion of the entire room, the Committee collected any remaining tools, paint brushes, etc. and admired their “handy work” alongside a DSS representative.

## **2. Decision Making Process**

The Committees for the Richland and Charleston County Projects were co-chaired by two or three young lawyers, and were assisted by the staff at the South Carolina Bar. Most of the decisions in planning the project were made by the chairs, along with input from DSS and the Committee members.

The Committee co-chairs held several telephone conferences in advance of the Project to discuss the project in general, and to allocate responsibilities. Each of the co-chairs accepted responsibility for different aspects of the project. The role of Committee members was primarily to assist with contacting area businesses and collecting supplies for the Project. Due to the nature of the project, in-person meetings were not required. Therefore, the Committee co-chairs organized Committee conference calls on an “as needed” basis as the project progressed.

This year, the Committee will also utilize telephone conferences as the primary source of communication. The three coordinators may hold in-person meetings in their respective areas to follow-up on the progress of their Committee members.

## **3. Considerations in Project Planning**

### **a. Community Resources**

For this project, significant community resources included the local businesses that worked with the Committee to provide supplies at a discounted price. Generally speaking, this only required a telephone call from a Committee member. Most of the businesses contacted were pleased to be able to help with such a worthwhile project. The agency, DSS, was also an important resource in answering questions and serving as a facilitator between the families who utilized the visitation rooms and the Committee. DSS enabled the Committee to improve the items that were most important to the families and children, thus making their visits more enjoyable.

This year, the Committee would like to increase participation from community businesses by publicizing the event. The Committee will work with the South Carolina Bar staff who have established connections with the local media to get the word out to the public, and hopefully generate additional interest in the Project.

**b. Personnel**

The only personnel required for this Project were the Committee members, who volunteered their time to work on the Project. They were responsible for contacting local businesses to obtain the supplies needed for the Project. They were also responsible for completing their Do-it-Yourself assignments on the day of the Project. Otherwise, the Committee members were simply expected to attend any telephone conferences that were held. Although additional personnel would have been preferable, for one visitation room, a Committee of four to six individuals completed the Project. Ideally, for this year's Project, each site will have four to six Committee members, including the coordinator.

Additional personnel for the Project included the South Carolina Bar staff, who assisted with the committee interest mail out, which notified Bar members of the Committee and Project. This enabled the Committee chairperson to identify those individuals who were interested in working on the Project. In addition, the Bar staff also maintained all financial records for the Project. This year, the Committee anticipates working closely with the South Carolina Bar staff to try to increase publicity for the event, thereby potentially generating more contributions to the Project, *i.e.* more volunteers and/or supplies.

**c. Revenue Availability/Fund Raising**

The Committee was given a small budget, so it was imperative to seek financial assistance from other sources. This generally meant contacting vendors to obtain contributions or significant discounts for the home improvement supplies needed to complete the Project. The Committee also paired with local organizations like the Junior League to obtain additional grant money and donations. Committee members were encouraged to use their resources, including their individual rolodexes, to make the Project happen.

This year, the Committee has also been given a small budget and will be utilizing the same methods of fund raising. The Committee anticipates seeking new partners to help with the Project, including the Children in the Law Center in South Carolina and local charities that benefit children. One local charity, Prevent Child Abuse South Carolina, has pledged the talent of two local artists who have agreed to provide paintings for the new visitation rooms. Once the Committee has had an opportunity to view the new sites and assess the needs, it will hold a brainstorming session for ideas on potential renovations and fund raising possibilities. This should provide a wealth of fresh ideas for the Project.

**d. Other (Equipment/Physical Needs)**

Other than the above-described supplies, the Changing Rooms for Children Project did not require any special equipment. Minimal office space was necessary for the storage of supplies collected for the Project and only one

meeting room was required for any in-person meetings of the Committee. For these reasons, the Project is ideal for young lawyer groups that do not have large meeting spaces. For those groups with large budgets, it might be helpful to store all of the supplies in one location before the Project. The supplies would be more easily inventoried and needs could be quickly identified.

### **III. Implementation ... How to Replicate This Project**

#### **A. Timetable**

An affiliate should begin planning this project approximately seven months in advance.

#### **Seven Months Prior to the Renovation/Beautification**

1. Identify chairperson.
2. Identify committee members.
3. Communicate with the Department of Social Services in order to identify contact person within the agency.
4. Meet with agency representative in order to identify the potential locations, view the locations, and identify the “punch list” items.

#### **Six Months Prior to the Renovation/Beautification**

1. Finalize the project location.
2. Prioritize punch list items.
3. Identify committee member coordinators for the different aspects of the project (including soliciting various home improvement vendors, local artists, book stores, law firms, food/beverage donations for days of event, and other potential contributors, as well as head painter, head designer, etc.).
4. Contact Bar publications in order to ensure advertisements regarding the program (should help with solicitation of volunteers for the day of the event).

#### **Five to Two Months Prior to the Renovation/Beautification**

1. Finalize solicitation process.
2. Committee volunteer coordinators for actual execution on date of project should begin to recruit volunteers.
3. Contact additional advertising sources (such as local newspaper regarding publicity for the event).
4. Confirm that advertisement/announcement remains on affiliate web site, and in affiliate and other bar publications.

#### **One Month to Two Weeks Prior to the Renovation/Beautification**

1. Confirm list of volunteers and contact to confirm attendance.
2. Coordinate time to deliver materials to site with agency contact.

3. Confirm receipt of all necessary materials to use for the renovation and beautification.
4. Continue to advertise event by sending blast fax to targeted group.

**B. Recruitment and Training of Volunteers**

Young lawyer volunteers should be recruited through personal contact with committee members, blast faxes, and advertisement through bar publications. No training is required.

**C. Publicity**

By working with a full committee of young lawyer volunteers, the event has been well publicized by informal word of mouth. More formal advertising methods included a “blast fax” to all young lawyers practicing in the area near the project, advertisements on the website, and local bar publications and newsletters.

**D. Day-To-Day Operations**

Not required.

**IV. Evaluation and Impact**

The Changing Rooms for Children Project provided a special place for families who are facing significant challenges to meet with their children. With only few days work and several helping hands, the Committee successfully accomplished its goal. DSS was extremely appreciative of the Committee’s efforts and reported that the families were delighted with the results of the renovation. Additionally, the receptivity to the agency regarding future programs provides a good measurement of success. As stated above, in South Carolina, the transformation of the rooms has been so well-received by children and parents alike that the agency agreed to allow the South Carolina Bar YLD to take on three additional rooms in three different counties.

The benefits of the Changing Rooms for Children Project cannot be overstated. As noted above, by giving their time, talent and resources to Changing Rooms for Children, Committee members helped provide a service that the State simply could not afford to provide. This, in turn, generated significant positive energy and feedback for lawyers from the State and from the community. Moreover, Changing Rooms for Children spotlighted the important role a home plays in the family dynamic. Thus, maybe in some small way, the Committee helped play a role in reuniting families and/or keeping families together.

This year, in an effort to obtain some additional feedback from the community, the Committee plans to create an evaluation form to distribute to DSS, which will allow families who are interested in commenting on the Project to do so anonymously. This is expected to provide a more in-depth look into the effective of the Project and additional areas that may not have been addressed.

## V. Bibliography/Other Resources

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