

STARTING A CASA PROGRAM IN ISRAEL: Judge Leonard Edwards, Santa Clara Superior Court (Ret.)

In 2009 someone introduced me to David Barzilai, an Israeli business man living in Sunnyvale, California (Silicon Valley). Somehow David had learned about our local CASA program that we call Child Advocates of Silicon Valley. He was so impressed that he set out to start a similar program in Israel. His plans were thorough, almost like working on a start-up company, something he knows a great deal about. He went through the 40 hour CASA training, attended local and national CASA conferences and meetings, introduced himself to Michael Piraino, and somehow found me, a retired Superior Court judge who had started the Silicon Valley (Santa Clara County) CASA program over 20 years ago.

David and I started planning. I persuaded him that it was critical to have judicial support for the new program. He informed me that he had already contacted Judge Avraham Sheinfeld, the senior juvenile court judge in Israel. I wrote to Judge Sheinfeld and suggested that I speak to the other Israeli juvenile court judges about CASA. The plans unfolded. My wife and I traveled to Israel in October of 2010. I was carrying materials provided by Michael Piraino as well as articles I had written and the CASA dvd I made a few years ago with a number of lead judges from the NCJFCJ.

First my wife and I visited the juvenile court in Jerusalem. Judge Peggy Hora had introduced me to Judge Uri Ben Dor, a former juvenile court judge now sitting in the family court. He received us graciously and introduced us to the 2 juvenile court judges in Jerusalem. We had the opportunity to sit in the juvenile court and watch the proceedings. The next day we visited Judge Sheinfeld's court and David was able to join us. We observed court and planned for the meeting the next day.

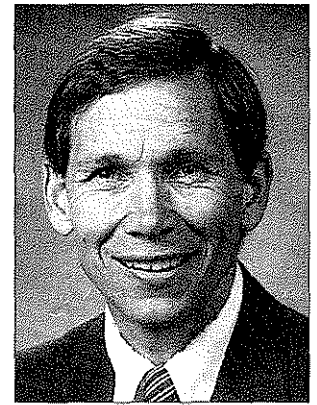
On Thursday, October 14th our year of planning came to a head. Margie (my wife), David and I met with all 14 of the juvenile court judges in Israel at their monthly meeting in Tel Aviv. We were given an hour to talk about CASA and why it would be an excellent program to start in Israel. I spoke from a judicial perspective, and then Margie talked about being an advocate as she was for several years in the Silicon Valley program. Then David talked about his plans for starting the program, attracting volunteers, hiring a director and a supervisor, and other necessary steps to get the program off the ground. We pointed out that CASA has been operating in the United States for over 30 years, that there were over 1050 programs nationally with over 70,000 volunteers, and that all of the technical information that a new program needed would be available from National CASA or from individual programs in the United States. We suggested that Israel start

with one or two pilot programs and that once they were up and running, the program could expand. Israel is about the size of New Jersey and has a population of about 7 million people so starting small seemed like a good idea.

Then we waited for the questions and reactions from the Israeli judges. It was mostly positive. We identified at least five judges who volunteered to be one of the pilot programs. Indeed, there was some competition regarding which judicial districts would be first. Of course there were also some judges who thought the program would not work or was not legal, but the President of the juvenile court judge's association seemed ready to help the program move forward. She started talking about which officials she would talk to in order to gain support.

We left believing that a significant step had been taken and that starting a CASA program in Israel was realistic. The next steps will be for David Barzilai to identify funding for the start-up, find a director, select the two pilot sites, and launch the program. I suspect that some support will come from the United States where we know how important a CASA program can be for abused and neglected children who are before the juvenile court.

Should you have an interest in this program, please contact David Barzilai at David.Barzilai@yahoo.com. There are not many CASA programs in countries outside the United States. I believe that Israel can be one of the most successful programs in the world.



Israel's 14 juvenile court judges. Tel Aviv, October 14, 2010.