

Fostering care

GRANT TO ALLOW BERRY STREET CHIEF TO RESEARCH TRENDS

By Nicholas Salau-Thom

Anita Pell is heading overseas on a mission to help Australia recruit and retain foster carers.

Ms Pell, Hume regional director of Berry Street, has been awarded a Churchill Fellowship to research the foster care networks of Ireland, England, the United States and Canada.

From May next year, Ms Pell will spend about two months visiting and observing foster care organisations.

"I couldn't stop crying, I am so honoured and privileged to be awarded a Churchill Fellowship," Ms Pell said of the award.

Her project is aimed at improving Australia's foster care system, especially in relation to recruiting and retaining foster carers.

The number of foster carers in Victoria has dropped from 5500 in 2002 to just 985 last year.

"Foster carers are leaving the system in alarming numbers, while the demand for them is becoming greater and greater," Ms Pell said.

Her research will look at how to attract younger foster carers and provide them with greater support.



Opportunity: Berry Street Hume region director Anita Pell has been awarded a Churchill Fellowship.

Picture: Sally Smith

In the UK, foster care agencies provide an income for carers, which has succeeded in attracting more people.

"In the UK, people can be foster carers as a career, but that choice is unavailable," Ms Pell said.

"We (in Australia) no longer have a choice about where to put a child; 10 years ago there may have been five or six candidates for each child, we now struggle for one.

"If we don't change our recruiting and retention system, we could be without a foster care system within five-to-10 years."

Ms Pell said she wanted to thank her employer, Berry Street, for supporting her "and the Churchill Trust for giving me such a wonderful opportunity".

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust awards more than 100 Churchill Fellowships each year.

Each fellowship is comprised of a cash grant — the average value being \$25 000 — allowing the recipient to travel internationally to conduct their research.

Ms Pell's scholarship has also been sponsored by The Jack Brockhoff Foundation, a fund set up by the late Sir Jack Brockhoff to support organisations which promote the health and wellbeing of communities.

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