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By Anna Nguyen

Need a baby sitter? Web site offers help

Many parents agree the best way to find a babysitter is through friends and family, but the Internet provides another option, an online service called sittercity.com.

Founder Genevieve Thiers, a native of Willingboro, started the service three years ago in Boston.

While she was a student at Boston College, she said, 30 families desperately sought her baby-sitting services, which gave her the idea of starting a Web site linking parents with sitters, modeled after online dating services.

“Why isn’t there one place parents can go?” she asked.

Since its inception in 2001, the business is now based in Chicago where Thiers lives and serves about 20 metropolitan areas, including Philadelphia, North Jersey, and San Francisco. About 25,000 parents and 50,000 sitters are in the sittercity network, Thiers said.

Currently, Burlington County parents can tap into a Philadelphia pool of more than 1,000 sitters, but sitters closer to this area have been signing up, Thiers said.

Sittercity launched in the Philadelphia area this fall.

Rebecca Marshall, a Palmyra resident whose baby-sitting experience includes her year-old son and the children of friends, signed up as a baby sitter this week.

“A friend said it worked well for her,” Marshall said about a woman in Pennsylvania who told her she received job offers within two weeks of signing up.

Baby sitters who register must be older than 17. There is no charge for baby sitters to register. Parents pay \$40 to join and \$5 a month after that. Parents and baby sitters negotiate their own rates.

“I really thought it was a great site,” said Meredith Becker, a Cherry Hill mother. Becker said she likes the online sitter profiles, which include contact information, references, availability and certifications such as in cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

The site also offers lists of holiday sitters and other services such as light housecleaning and pet sitting.

There is a drawback for parents. The site does not screen baby-sitter candidates, but partners with organizations that will do criminal background checks for a fee. Parents and sitters also can comment on each other anonymously.

Just like the parents, sitters need to screen potential jobs and employers to make sure they are legitimate, law enforcement officials said.

“We would tell anyone to be careful in any baby-sitting situation,” said Detective Michael Tansey of the cyber-crime unit in the New Jersey State Police. “This (sittercity.com) just expands your circle of availability.”

Tansey advises parents to verify references and observe how baby-sitter interacts with the children.

Parents should check more than one reference and those references should be trusted members of the community, said Silas Townsend, executive director of Burlington County Community Action Program, which offers a county child-care resource and referral center.

“Something can go awry, no matter how you find someone,” said Becker.

Becker said the Web site is helpful because many parents don’t like to share reliable sitters because their friends may need them for the same parties or events.

“Once someone finds a good sitter, people usually don’t like to share,” she said.