

Nine-To-Five Chopper

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24- hour rescue still up in air

THE future of the Illawarra's 24-hour rescue helicopter service is uncertain seven months after it was promised.

Minister for the Illawarra David Campbell's office has said the 24-hour service was expected to be in place in September, while a spokesman for Health Minister Reba Meagher said it could take until the end of the year before an extended service was operating.

However, the new contract provider, Canadian Helicopter Company WHO Australia, has no plans to go 24/7. "Not at this stage," CHC executive director Chris Riddings said.

"We haven't been given instruction from the NSW Government to go 24 (hours) yet.

"It's a service type decision and when they want to talk about that we'll sit down and go through the planning process. At the moment it's just continuing as a day service."

Mr Riddings said CHC had been preoccupied with starting up the service under the new contract, which became effective in May.

The rescue service will need to move its base from Albion Park to Coniston before it can go to a 24-hour operation. CASA regulations require accommodation services, including bedrooms, to be provided for night staff. Coniston is the only Illawarra heliport with such facilities.

Wollongong City Council said it had started negotiations with CHC to move the base to Coniston, but stressed it was still early days.

The Westpac Life Saver Rescue Helicopter Service, which used to operate the Illawarra service, still has a lease for the Coniston base until May next year.

Chief executive officer Doug Menzies said he had told CHC he was willing to hand over the lease early so the service could go 24/7 as soon as possible.

When the Government announced in December that the Illawarra would receive a 24-hour service it was considered a community victory after a three-year campaign.

Guardian Air Rescue was a principal player in the campaign and chairman Phil Buckland said he had received an undertaking it would be implemented in September, and produced a May 15 email from Mr Campbell's office saying: "The CHC Australia rescue helicopter service ... will become a 24-hour service later this year (from about September) ..." However, a spokesman for Ms Meagher insisted the target date was the end of the year.