Spotlight on **Pam Binnington**

Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department Secondee to the Australian Pro Bono Centre

Pam presenting the Not-for-Profit Lawyer of the Year Award at the Association of Corporate Counsel Australia In-house Legal National Conference & Awards in Canberra, 2023

Pam Binnington joined the Australian Pro Bono Centre on secondment from the Australian Government in July 2023. In this article, Pam is pleased to share insights from her career and her experience at the Australian Pro Bono Centre, working to support the organisation's mission to grow participation and excellence in pro bono.

Throughout my career I have worked across a diverse range of policy areas within the Commonwealth public sector. I was excited by the secondment opportunity at the Australian Pro Bono Centre (the Centre) as I saw it as a way to use and develop my policy and research skills in a different capacity. Having volunteered with a community service organisation for the past 15 years, I am passionate about supporting equal access to the justice system for all people, as I have seen first-hand the positive and in some cases life-changing differences this makes to individuals, families and communities. In 2023, in correspondence to all law firms on the Commonwealth Legal Services Panel, Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus wrote:

"While law firms engaging in pro bono work is not an alternative to an adequately resourced legal assistance sector, the government strongly supports the legal profession's commitment to pro bono legal work, which supports the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of the Australian community to access the justice system."

The opportunity to work at the Centre was a way for me to directly express my support for this sentiment, and to learn more about the pro bono sector in Australia and how best to support its progression and development into the future.

Working in the Australian Public Service

I studied law and international relations at the Australian National University and began my career as a graduate in the then Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations, working as a workplace relations policy officer. It was an exciting time to be a part of that policy landscape, with the recent introduction of the Fair Work Act 2009 nationalising Australia's workplace relations

Pam with Katrin O'Sullivan, winner of the NFP Lawyer of the Year Award

system. I spent the next few years working predominantly on workplace relations reforms, with a focus on the employment safety net including the minimum wage and award conditions, paid parental leave and gender pay equity. I was also privileged to assist with work to introduce paid family and domestic violence leave, and to work on workplace policies to better protect workers with increased vulnerabilities, including migrant workers.

Most recently I led the Strategic Policy team at Safe Work Australia for five years, working on topical work, health and safety policy challenges. There has been a rapid change in work in Australia over the last decade. Understanding trends such as the acceleration of the Australian economy towards services, increasing global trade, rapid adoption of digital technology, demographic shifts, changing expectations around care and family, and the increasing impacts of climate change on our environment are all a crucial part of developing appropriate regulatory and policy frameworks to protect the health and safety of all workers in Australia. This made for an interesting and challenging role.

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My experience with the Australian Pro Bono Centre

Since commencing at the Centre in mid-2023, I have been incredibly impressed by the span and quality of the work of the Centre's passionate and knowledgeable team. I have learned so much about the legal assistance sector and been privileged to meet legal professionals across the private, public and community sectors

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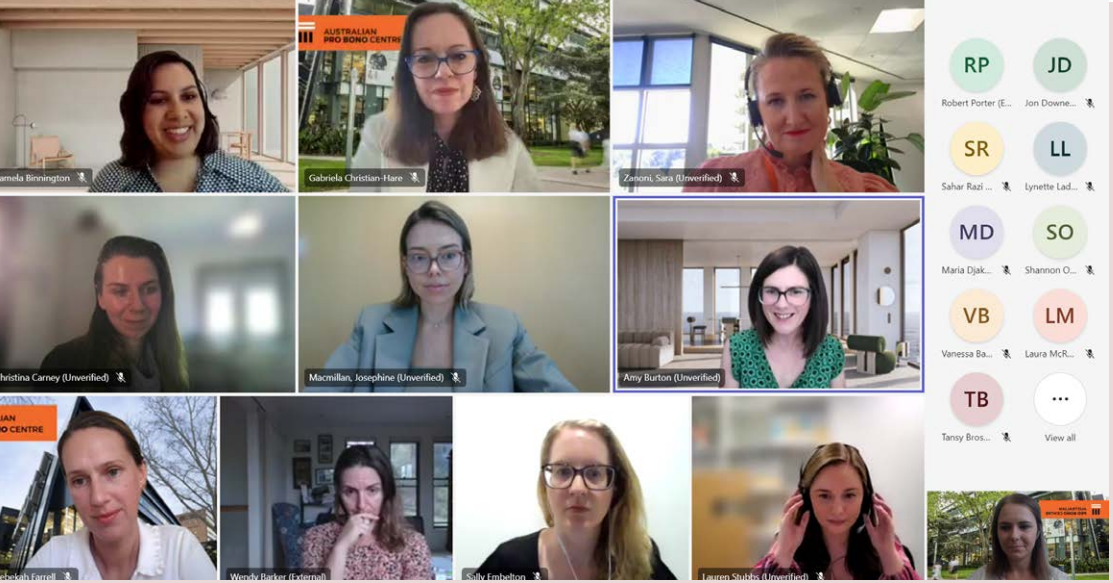
working towards a common goal of increasing access to justice for all. The reach of the Centre is truly remarkable, with the small team led by the incredibly experienced CEO, Gabriela Christian-Hare, meaningfully participating and engaging across the pro bono sector nationally and globally.

During my time at the Centre, I have had the opportunity to work on increasing participation in pro bono work by in-house lawyers (corporate and government). As part of this focus, I have been engaging with the Australian Government Legal Service Board's Pro Bono Working Group, supporting the development of a framework to support lawyers working for the Australian Public Service to engage in more pro bono work. Pro bono work enables all government lawyers to broaden their experiences, develop their professional skills and gain a better understanding of the community context in which they undertake their work as public servants.

With over one third of the Australian legal workforce working for government or a corporate organisation, it is imperative to foster a culture of pro bono work across the whole legal sector to maintain the phenomenal growth in pro bono work Australia has experienced, particularly over the last ten years. I note with interest



2024 In-house Pro Bono Roundtable hosted by the Centre

the recent developments in the UK including the implementation of the In-House Pro Bono Pledge, which has been signed by companies such as Goldman Sachs, Coca Cola and the London Stock Exchange Group, and hope that this can inspire a further push for companies and governments in Australia to support their lawyers engaging in pro bono work by signing up to the National Pro Bono Target.

Aside from a focus on growing in-house pro bono, I have also had the opportunity to support the Centre's work in administering the National Pro Bono Target, representing the Centre and promoting its suite of excellent resources and research at events such as the Australia Corporate Counsel's Awards and the Asia Pro Bono Consortium Roundtable, and undertaking strategic research to support the Centre's mission to grow participation and excellence in pro bono legal services.

"A secondment to the Centre provides a great opportunity for public servants interested in access to justice and the legal assistance sector to undertake work directly connected to the support of this sector, and to meet first-hand the incredibly dedicated pro bono professionals that are very willing to share their knowledge and experiences."

What's next

At the end of my secondment I will be taking up a role as Director of Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Transitions at the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. I'm excited to be taking on a role developing policy to support migrants in their critical contributions to the Australian community and economy.

Key takeaways from my secondment to the Australian Pro Bono Centre

My time at the Australian Pro Bono Centre has been a fantastic experience and has shed light on the inclusive and collaborative nature that underpins Australia's pro bono legal community, and the work of the Centre to bring the sector together. The Centre plays a critical role in supporting the growth of pro bono work in Australia, through information, resources, events, learning and development activities, and representing the pro bono sector through consultation and advocacy. I have been incredibly impressed by the Centre's reach and how it has established itself as a trusted source of innovative pro bono policy development and research work globally.

A secondment to the Centre provides a great opportunity for public servants interested in access to justice and the legal assistance sector to undertake work directly connected to the support of this sector, and to meet first-hand the incredibly dedicated pro bono professionals that are very willing to share their knowledge and experiences. ■

Pam with Jennifer Chen at the launch of the With You Project Trauma-Informed Organisational Toolkit

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