The power of collaboration:
Inside the National Access to Justice and Pro Bono Conference

At the heart of Australia's access to justice and pro bono legal sector, the biennial National Access to Justice and Pro Bono Conference **(Conference)** has emerged as a space where the private profession, community legal services, government and academia gather to focus on how to better coordinate the delivery of legal services at a national, state and regional level.

"As the national centre of leadership for pro bono legal services, working to grow participation and excellence in pro bono, the Centre plays a central coordinating role in the Conference in partnership with the Law Council of Australia."

L-R: Tania Wolff AccS (Crim), President-elect of the Law Council of Australia; Hugh de Kretser, President of the Australian Human Rights Commission; together with panellists of 'Truth Telling for Transformational Justice: The Yorrook Commission Model': Cindy Penrose, Rueben Berg and Travis Lovett (2025).

Origins and growth

The First National Pro Bono Conference: 'For the public good' was held in Canberra in August 2000. Since then, the Conference has evolved into the National Access to Justice and Pro Bono Conference, adopting its name in 2006.

The inaugural event, an initiative of the then-Commonwealth Attorney-General, the Hon. Daryl Williams AM QC MP, was attended by about 500 members of the public, private and community legal sectors, legal educators, judges and judicial officers, government officials, and representatives from professional associations and the business and philanthropic sectors. It led to the creation of the National Pro Bono Task Force that produced its report in June 2001 and resulted in the establishment of the Australian Pro Bono Centre (**Centre**) in 2002.

Organisers and partnerships

As the national centre of leadership for pro bono legal services working to grow participation and excellence in pro bono, the Centre plays a central coordinating role in the Conference in partnership with the Law Council of Australia (**LCA**). Since 2006, the event has been jointly hosted by the Centre and the LCA, often in partnership with local professional organisations including the Queensland Law Society in 2023 or the Law Institute of Victoria in 2025.

The LCA has worked in the interests of Australia's lawyers and the Australian community for over 90 years. It was created in 1933 as the peak national body representing the legal profession. Given the LCA's long involvement in national advocacy and

L-R: Gabriela Christian-Hare, CEO of the Centre, Professor Ed Santow, University of Technology Sydney, The Hon Mark Dreyfus KC, MP, former Commonwealth Attorney-General, and Luke Murphy, former President of Law Council of Australia at the 8th National Access to Justice and Pro Bono Conference (2023).

Conference dinner at the 9th National Access to Justice and Pro Bono Conference in Melbourne (2025).

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representing the legal professions' interests to the Federal Government, it was and is a natural partner for the Conference.

Why it matters

As Tania Wolff, President-elect of the LCA noted in her 2025 Opening Remarks of the Conference, "Access to justice is not a privilege — it is the foundation of any fair and decent society. It's the bridge between law in theory and justice as it's experienced — by real people in real life. Like education and healthcare, it is essential public infrastructure: as vital to our social fabric as schools and hospitals."

However, from funding and human resources stretched thin across the sector, to unmet legal need especially faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and people in rural and regional areas, access to justice remains a persistent challenge in Australia. Systemic issues and changing social dynamics nationally and internationally are impacting the community cohesion and the rule of law, and in turn affecting attitudes to, and assistance for, those needing legal help. The Conference serves as a platform to discuss these issues.

It allows representatives of the legal assistance sector to:

- surface systemic issues,
- share innovation in service delivery,
- explore emerging topics, and
- build connections across sectors.

Centre team with delegation from the Philippines at the 9th National Access to Justice and Pro Bono Conference in Melbourne (2025).

"The Conference served as an opportunity to share insights and experiences, reinforcing the sector's collaborative national approach."

Reflections from the 2025 Conference

Under the theme of "Transforming Systems, Empowering Communities", more than 500 representatives from private practice, Community Legal Centres, Legal Aid Commissions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services and Family Violence Prevention Legal Services met in Melbourne from 29-31 October to discuss a broad range of issues affecting the delivery of legal assistance.

A number of key themes stood out at the 9th Access to Justice and Pro Bono Conference:

1. Systemic underfunding and resourcing
   Legal assistance providers, including Legal Aid Commissions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, Family Violence Prevention Legal Services, and Community Legal Centres, are universally affected by systemic underfunding. The funding announced in the National Access to Justice Partnership is insufficient and fails to cover some of the sector's most vital work. While pro bono work is helping to fill this gap, it is not a substitute for a properly funded legal assistance sector.
2. Empowering community-controlled services
   Unmet legal needs disproportionately affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Addressing this gap requires adequately funded, community-controlled, and culturally competent services. Speakers highlighted that genuine reconciliation demands truth before treaty - a process grounded in accountability, cultural leadership, and shared sovereignty. The Conference coincided with a historic moment in Victoria, as the first state or territory in Australia to pass of the Statewide Treaty Bill on 31 October 2025.
3. Strength through collaboration.
   Across the sessions, speakers highlighted there is an increasing need for closer, genuine collaboration across the entire legal sector. The Conference served as an opportunity to share insights and experiences, reinforcing the sector's collaborative national approach .
4. Technology with caution
   Innovations in technology and AI can improve the efficiency of legal services, particularly in triage. However, speakers warned that without proper training, ethical frameworks, and human oversight, technology risks widening, rather than closing, the justice gap. The legal sector must stay abreast of these developments but is urged to establish safeguards.
5. Creative service delivery
   The gap between legal service provision and public needs necessitates the adoption of creative approaches. To ensure people receive assistance when and where they need it, the sector must strengthen legal literacy and public trust and rethink service delivery models. At the same time, these efforts must be undertaken while safeguarding client and lawyer well-being and maintaining culturally safe practices.

Looking ahead

The Conference continues to play a vital role in shaping discourse and action around access to justice. The hope is that the connections forged and ideas surfaced will translate into practical impact: better-resourced legal assistance, more innovative service models and more collaboration across the sector to assist those who currently face the greatest barriers to justice. ■

- Australian Pro Bono Centre

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