



Law Council
OF AUSTRALIA

2025 National Access to Justice and Pro bono Conference – Opening Remarks

Speech delivered by Tania Wolff, President-elect

National Access to Justice and Pro bono Conference, Melbourne

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1. Thank you (Wurunjeri elder) Bill Nicholson for that generous Welcome to Country.
2. I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet — the Bunurong and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation — and pay my respects to their Elders past and present.
3. I thank them for their continued connection to land, water and community, and extend that respect to other First Nations peoples joining us today.
4. 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.
5. When access to justice works, people resolve problems early, protect their families, and rebuild their lives. When it fails, disputes escalate, families fracture, inequality deepens and confidence in our system erodes.
6. That's why ensuring access to justice cannot be the work of lawyers alone. It's a shared national responsibility — for our profession, our institutions and our governments — to safeguard the rule of law and the dignity of those it serves.
7. The strength of this conference lies in who is in this room — all of you - practitioners, policymakers, researchers, advocates, and those at the coalface of service delivery.
8. Matthew Hibbins, the President of the Law Institute of Victoria, formally welcomed you last night, so forgive me but I won't repeat that today — and, frankly, if I were to properly acknowledge every esteemed guest here, it would take the entire morning — but your presence gives me great faith in our collective will to meet this challenge together.
9. I thank our conference co-hosts, organisers and sponsors — especially the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department — for their ongoing support.
10. This year's theme — *Transforming Systems, Empowering Communities* — reminds us to look beyond individual cases to the systems that determine who can access justice at all.
11. Over the next two days, we'll explore not only what works, but how to sustain and scale what works — guided by an outstanding lineup of speakers from across Australia and the region.
12. This gathering represents the full breadth of our access-to-justice workforce — Legal Aid Commissions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, Family Violence Prevention Legal Services, Community Legal Centres, and members of the private profession who deliver pro bono work and those who deliver more than 70 per cent of all legal-aid grants nationwide.
13. That contribution — largely from small and sole practitioners, often women, often in regional and rural areas — was all but overlooked in the National Partnership Agreement. It is a workforce that too often labours in silence, underfunded and

overextended. Goodwill alone cannot keep the lights on. Without sustained investment, we risk losing the very people who make justice work and accessible.

14. So the question for us — and for governments — is not **only** what access to justice looks like, but who delivers it, how they do so, and how we support them. We know from health and education that reform without resourcing fails. Rights on paper require people — skilled, supported, sustainable — to make them have effect.
15. Technology offers new opportunities — and I look forward to the sessions exploring both its promise and its pitfalls. Used well, it can extend our reach and open new pathways to justice.
16. But it can never replace the compassion, judgment and trust that come from human connection. Our task is to ensure that innovation serves inclusion, and that digital progress never leaves empathy behind.
17. And as we debate and reflect over these two days, I'd like to issue one final invitation: That we also turn our minds to how we communicate — not just what we say.
18. Transforming systems is not only a technical challenge; it's a cultural one. It demands that we listen as well as speak, engage as well as advocate, and find ways to persuade rather than polarise.
19. For a cause as vital to our civil fabric as access to justice, we must be mindful to bring the community with us.
20. Because access to justice isn't merely a legal concept — it's a civic promise. And it's one we can only keep together.