



INSTITUTE OF
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
AUSTRALIA

02 6154 9800
PO Box 4349 Kingston ACT 2604
admin@act.ipaa.org.au
www.act.ipaa.org.au

ABN 24 656 727 375

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE

EP#4: CITIZENS FIRST with Kathryn Campbell AO CSC, Secretary of the
Department of Social Services

Hosted by David Pembroke, Founder and CEO, contentgroup

28 APRIL 2020

DAVID PEMBROKE: Hello ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian public service. My name's David Pembroke, and thank you for joining me. Just before we get started today, a big thank you to all of you for your response to the podcast. In the first few weeks, we've had well over a couple of thousand downloads, which is certainly above my expectation, and really telling us that there is a great interest in the people and the stories of the APS. So thank you to you and stay tuned. And by the way, if you do see any of the promotion for the podcast come up in your social media feeds, please give it a push along, a bit of a share with your networks as we work together to build this platform for the people and the stories of the APS.

DAVID PEMBROKE: My guest today is Kathryn Campbell, the secretary of the Department of Social Services and a senior member of the Australian public service leadership. Kathryn has served in a number of roles across the APS before she was appointed secretary of the Department of Human Services by the then prime minister, Julia Gillard. In 2017, Catherine moved across to be secretary of the Department of Social Services with responsibility for both social policy and service delivery. And interestingly, a number of the programmes such as Centrelink that were previously part of her remit as secretary at DHS and now under Services Australia, which again, is part of DSS. Kathryn is also a major general in the Australian Army Reserve, and in the 2019 Australia Day honours, she was appointed an officer in the order of Australia for her distinguished service to public administration through her senior roles in government departments and in the Australian Army Reserve. She joins me in Studio 19. Kathryn Campbell, welcome to Work with Purpose.

KATHRYN CAMPBELL: Thanks David for having me.

DAVID PEMBROKE: A busy month, a busy few weeks. How are you holding up?

KATHRYN CAMPBELL: Well, I think it's been busy from all year to be honest. We had the bushfires and then from February and March with the coronavirus. We are holding up really well. The whole team are tired, but know that they're doing great work and that's keeping them going.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So just let's go back to the bushfires and that tempo. And as you say, it was such a difficult time for Australia and the public service really had to get back to work to get that done. How did you manage that change at that part of it, before you got to corona? How difficult was that?

KATHRYN CAMPBELL: So the bushfires were pretty challenging for me because as you said, I'm in the army reserve, and I was part of the call out. So I was called out in January and didn't go back to Social Services until the start of February. So Nathan Williamson was the acting secretary of Social Services, but I spoke with him every day. And so we got people back in order to make sure that we were supporting Services Australia in particular to get out those payments to Australians who had lost their houses and were feeling hardship during that period of time.

KATHRYN CAMPBELL: So that meant a lot of our staff didn't get the usual break in January, and also of course Canberra was heavily impacted by the smoke and other activities. So people kind of came back at the start of February when Parliament came back, and they were already pretty puffed because they'd been working hard. And then of course

coronavirus and the government's response meant that we had to mobilise different strategies, get together briefing teams, and we've been going ever since.

DAVID PEMBROKE: I really do want to get into the detail, because I think inside DSS there's been such change, such dramatic change. But just about the people side of it, that exhaustion, that difficulty. How have you seen that manifest itself, or have people been able to manage it quite well by just continuing to self-manage themselves and their workloads?

KATHRYN CAMPBELL: I think people have done a really good job at self-managing and we've been very much aware of it. The real advantage for our portfolios, we get to see the outcome for the citizen. So when we put in place a payment, we get to see an Australian citizen getting that payment, or a programme like domestic violence, we see that people are going to be better off. And that's very satisfying for our staff. They see the outcome. And particularly when they work with Services Australia, they actually see the impact on the ground. So I think we are particularly lucky. NDIS, a participant gets a package and they get a range of supports and they're able to improve what might've been some difficult situation in the past. So that makes it much easier for us I think.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So when the virus came, how about you tell us that story for you in terms of the work that you were doing at the time, and what happened?

KATHRYN CAMPBELL: So we were getting ready for the normal budget process. The public service works in cycles and seasons and we were going through those normal processes when of course there was a requirement to do other briefing and get some options ready for government to consider on what might happen if we saw significant increases, particularly in unemployment. And so we had put a number of those proposals together. They were considered, and I think the prime minister announced them on the 22nd of March. And it was that day as well where we saw significant lockdowns on movement across the states.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Businesses all closed down.

KATHRYN CAMPBELL: And the 23rd, Monday the 23rd was one of the busiest days for us. We saw incredible spikes. We saw the pictures of people lining up outside the Centrelink offices. Our IT probably ... yeah, it wobbled. And there was a few wobbles that day and we doubled and the CIO did a great job of doubling capacity and things like that. But we saw Australians in need. And that meant we had to be able to respond to that. We had to do different things, we had to put in different options, the intent to claim so people could say, "Right, I'm planning on claiming. I can't just claim at the moment, and I'll come back to you."

KATHRYN CAMPBELL: So we worked with Services Australia and the ministers very closely to do innovative approaches, things that were a little bit different to what we had done in the past.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah, right. The numbers were 6,000 to 50,000 to 150,000 in terms of claims in a matter of 72 hours. So what does that look like when you're inside a business trying to deal with that?

KATHRYN CAMPBELL: So we always knew we were going to have to surge staff and we were already in the process of surging staff. We went much faster after that.

- DAVID PEMBROKE: And by surging staff, what do you mean? You're getting them from wherever ...
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: More people.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: More people. Okay.
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: So more staff from our different ... so we have our partners who actually assist us. Some of the big firms like Serco, we got them to get more people. We engaged more people through labour hire firms, we engaged people on non-ongoing contracts. We also importantly moved staff in the public service from different departments down into Tuggeranong to work. So we've got a whole lot of graduates and different staff down in Tuggeranong from agencies right across the public service who are now answering phones and processing JobSeeker claims. And once upon a time they were doing something completely different, but they're actually focused on helping Australians as we speak.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: And what was the process to onboard those staff that were coming from left right and centre? How were you able to sort of take them from whatever they were doing to being useful and helping Australian citizens in distress?
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: So Services Australia have training programmes, and we call them training modules. And so a couple of days in order to take telephone calls and then a five day programme in order to process claims. And we've been truncating that as we go and working out how we can find synergies. But all the people who came in had to go through that training so that they were able to provide well balanced support to Australians when they rang up or when they are processing the claims. And we have a queue aid process, so people do the four day training, they do a couple of days on the job, they're a queue aid, and then they kind of sit free as a fully-fledged staff member in that process.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: So things like pandemics do sit on risk registers. So they're sort of identified as risks. Were you ready for a risk? And certainly probably never ready for a risk like that on top of what you'd already dealt with the bushfires.
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: So Services Australia in particular are used to surging, and the last time we probably surged in a big space was back in 2011 with the floods in Queensland. We had a lot of people who required support and a lot of people who joined the unemployment queues and the like. Before that, in 2008, when we saw the global financial crisis and saw a lot more people who found themselves unemployed. But I think it's fair to say this has been much larger than that and much quicker. We'd had a more gradual lead up in 2008, and even in 2011 we had more time to get ready. This was very, very quick. So the numbers, the Prime Minister announced them yesterday, we had 500,000 claims have been processed in the last five weeks. We'd processed 500,000 claims in the entire year until March. So in the last five weeks, we've done a year's worth of work.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: It's interesting, you mentioned there before about the ICT perhaps wobbled for a bit under that sort of a load, but perhaps people don't understand that it really is a big technology engine that sits under the Services Australia and many of the programmes, isn't it?
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: It's a massive technology engine and it's a mature engine as well. There are a number of programmes to upgrade and update it, but the base level was put in in

1989, and it was in COBOL, which is a language that most people won't know. But there are some people who remember it from when they were at university. And we continue to update that, but sometimes we have to go back into those older systems. And that takes a little while to do.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But in terms of that, what actually do you do to stand it up? Like what physically can you do for a system such as that, to make sure that it can stand up to that sort of load? What things happen?

KATHRYN CAMPBELL: So the technology people, the CIO, could take you through the detail, the number of servers, the number of routers ...

DAVID PEMBROKE: So that's what it is.

KATHRYN CAMPBELL: The number of transactions. But it's just the number of the capacity to be able to deal with that many concurrent users. And we had many more concurrent users than we were accustomed to. And recently, with the superannuation changes that happened just yesterday, we were much better prepared to have that ability to surge the IT system so that it could actually sustain that many people logging on at the same time basically.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Sure. And as the secretary, you obviously carry a lot of responsibility. How were you feeling when you were seeing the vision on the television news of the people lining up and the distress and everything else? And I'm sure Ministers had their views on what they were saying. That must've been a dreadfully stressful time for you.

KATHRYN CAMPBELL: It was a very difficult day, that first day. Now we have a CEO, Rebecca Skinner, who looks after services Australia and she started in mid-March. So we've been working quite closely, because a big ask within the first few weeks to be able to taking this on and I think I was on the phone with her constantly over that first week about just looking at the numbers, how we could do things differently. And that's where we put in intent to claim that allowed people to say, "I plan on claiming," and we were saying, "Don't come into the offices because we don't want you putting yourself at risk for contagious ... " if you were contagious or somebody else was. And we wanted to keep people away from coming into the office. So I think we just worked very closely as a team. We were very focused that first day about trying to make sure the IT stood up as well as getting people to process quickly. And we got many more people, as you said, than we expected on that first day.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah. So you've been around for quite some time in the leadership of the APS. And looking at it now from your position, looking across the APS, what's your reflection on how the APS has stood up to this particular challenge?

KATHRYN CAMPBELL: I think it's been amazing. I've been incredibly impressed at how people have focused on outcomes. So once upon a time, their focus may have been totally ... I was talking to some of the graduates from defence the other day that are down processing claims in Tuggeranong. They were doing lots of Defence stuff and now they're all focused on Australian citizens and unemployment benefits and the like. And it was a great conversation because they were talking to me about the policy, why would we do this and not do that, just so that they could get an understanding. They've spent their career so far focusing on defence policy and all of a sudden they're doing social security or social welfare policy and quite a different perspective.

- DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah, right. That's pretty encouraging, isn't it, to know that they get that benefit?
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: Well, we see this as a great benefit because one of the things that we appreciate in our portfolio is that link between what we do and the outcomes we get, but sometimes it's not as easy. I worked in the Department of Finance for many years, and sometimes the work you do there, it's kind of hard to connect that to what the citizen sees and what the citizen does. This is right on the edge of dealing with the Australian citizen. And I think as public servants, we must always remember what we're actually here for, what we're doing and how that links to the benefit of Australians.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: Now I'm sure you've been extremely busy, but have you had pause yet or time yet to sort of reflect and think, how is this going to change us? How is the APS going to be different as a result of what's taken place? The speed, the agility, that focus, the multi sort of team effort that's been brought to it. Have you had time yet to think about it?
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: So I've had time and I've also had some experience, and we in ... particularly in Services Australia and Social Services, when there's a major episode like a fire or the floods that we saw in 2011, we take a lot of those learnings from those multidisciplinary teams, the task forces, the flexibility. I suppose what I've noticed over time is we sometimes forget those lessons pretty quickly and we have to remind people about being agile and being focused on that outcome.
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: I think sometimes we lose sight of the outcome and we've got to constantly remind ourselves why we're doing things and constantly look at our resources and say, "Is that really the priority or can those people be moved to do this tasking?" And so I know in DSS when we first started moving people into claims processing with Services Australia, someone said, "Well, there's this project." I go, "Nope, that's not a priority at the moment. Take the people off that project." And I said to my team, "Have a think about what you're working on. Is that more important than getting an Australian who has lost their job access to money?" And there wasn't many. [crosstalk 00:14:47] And that was a pretty good test, and so we've got lots more people going in there to process claims because people urgently need access to that support.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: That's a great point that you raised though around there's been previous opportunities to reflect and to learn, but because of whatever the cycle that you just get on, and those lessons are lost. How can it be different this time? How can it be made different this time so as if to change sticks and that focus on the citizen, focus on priority, focus on outcome becomes much more ingrained in that day to day work of the APS?
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: I'm thinking this time it's right across the public service. It's not in a few pockets, it's everybody. And so that's why we've been so keen down in that call and processing centre to have people from every agency. And so particularly some of the younger people coming in, the graduates, I want these graduates to remember that during the pandemic that's what they went and did. They went and processed JobSeeker claims. They talked to Australians on the phone, they explained the difference between JobKeeper and JobSeeker. They explained the policy. And so when they might go back to Foreign Affairs or Defence or Veteran's Affairs, but they will remember that experience ...

- DAVID PEMBROKE: Take that experience with them, yeah.
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: ... and be curious and actively want to do things and want to know how a system comes together.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: So that's their motivation and I can get that. But what are the leadership going to do to keep it fresh. What are you going to be able to sustain that sense of collegiality that has obviously been in display?
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: Well, I think it is there all the time. It's not always ... people say, "Well it's not always on display," but I often see it across particularly what we might call clusters. So in the social area we have education, skills, and employment. We have Health, we have Social Services, Services Australia, the National Disability Insurance Agency, the National Indigenous Australians Agency, all those entities working together to make sure we get outcomes. And I suppose the thing that I would take away is it can't just be within those clusters. It's got to be across clusters as well. So how does that impact also on industry policy for example?
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: And I still believe it's really important for people to move between agencies, to not stay in an agency for the entire life, to actually go out and get different experience so you understand where people are coming from.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah. We've been getting questions, which is great, from the [inaudible 00:17:05] Future Leader Committee. And I have a question here from Steph McLennan at Geoscience Australia, and she asks, "We've seen a fast ramp up of task forces and work in the government's response to the COVID-19 crisis. How do we transition that from responsive crisis phase to a more sustained ... " it's probably a bit of a repeat of some of what we've been discussing, but that notion of sustained effort. How do you maintain it over time?
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: Well, I think both managers and staff have to be hungry for it. So the managers have to be flexible and say, "You know what, what I'm working on may have been important before, it's not anymore, or it's a lower priority than something." And they've got to seed ground, for want of a better term, to something that's more important, and they've got to let their high-performing staff, all their staff, go and do the things that are most critical. And people have to be willing to move. They have to be willing to be doing Defence policy one day and social policy the next or service delivery.
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: And I want people to be hungry to understand how the entire public service, how the entire economy works and what different levers government has to operate to ensure that Australians come through this.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: And have you seen that emerging with those young graduates down ... discussing with each other, maybe a [inaudible 00:18:29], talking to a defence, talking to a Social Services people.
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: They are and they were ... they decided to challenge some of the policy the other day. They were giving us some great feedback about how they thought we could do some ... a different cohort, which they didn't think had been looked after well, and I was able to give them the arguments as to ... well, I'm not sure I convinced them, but I gave it a red hot go.

- DAVID PEMBROKE: The confidence of a graduate.
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: I like it.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: What makes you proud to be a public servant?
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: That we deliver, that we go out there and we come to work because we want to make the lives of Australians better or we want to make Australia safer or we want to make Australia more prosperous. But deep down you talk to our people and they all have a reason for being there. They want to be there because they want to ensure that the family and domestic violence hotline remains open. I talked to the staff who work with 1-800-RESPECT, and they want to make sure that people who might be in distress in what is a very difficult circumstance have someone to ring and someone to reach out to when they may be in great need.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: So where to from here for you and the challenge that sits in front of you? The health crisis does seem to be slowly being brought under control, but we know what's coming next is going to be the reconstruction of the economy and dealing with the recession and everything else. What's on your radar from here on in?
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: So yes, the health crisis we hope will abate, but then we'll have the economic aftermath to deal with. And that's where we will see a lot more people wanting support from our portfolio. So at the moment it's JobSeeker, but eventually we might see that flow through to other cohorts, [inaudible 00:20:10] such as age pensioners or people with child support cases, for example. People will be earning less money, so therefore there will need to be an adjustment, and then we'll need to look at family tax on the other. There's many, many cycles of that. So we need to be ready to continue to providing enhanced support for some time. And we need to be responsive to government about what those policies look like. So the government's got a number of policies in place for six months that can be extended through to December, but we need to work out what happens after that and work with government to support them. And none of us will know exactly what's going to happen. There'll be a number of different scenarios what might occur and we need to be planning for each and every one of those scenarios.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: Just a final question in terms of that working relationship with the Minister's office, can you give people a bit of an insight as to how does that work between the Minister's office and the senior leadership of a major federal government department?
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: So we have two Cabinet Ministers, Minister Anne Ruston and Minister Stuart Robert. Minister Ruston's primarily responsible for the policy, the social security policy, and some of the families and community programmes, Minister Robert responsible for the National Disability Insurance Scheme and Services Australia and the delivery arm. So working with both of those offices closely because you can't develop policy without the ability to implement. So we have to work with both ministers. They are both passionately committed and understanding. We talk with them every day, going through the numbers every day, working about how many claims we have, what we think is going to happen next, what the indicators are telling us.
- KATHRYN CAMPBELL: What we're hearing from groups such as charities about what they're seeing with emergency relief and food relief, who's asking for food relief and whether or not we need a different response there or are there adequate other responses that are

going on. Particularly for example with the interaction of JobKeeper, how that's been working with JobSeeker and the different interactions there. So we work very closely with them every day.

DAVID PEMBROKE: It's interesting, that answer just alludes to those networks that you have access to where you can pick up the signals from inside the community about what's going on. So it's quite a ... it's not just the department sitting by itself, is it? It's a much wider remit that you have and networks that you have to give you the intelligence to make good decisions.

KATHRYN CAMPBELL: And state and territory governments.

DAVID PEMBROKE: State ... yeah, exactly.

KATHRYN CAMPBELL: So we're working with our colleagues, particularly in some of those committees and hearing what's happening in different states from our counterparts there. And they're also hearing from providers, not for profits and for profits, telling us what they're seeing on the ground so we're able to pre-empt what some of the issues may be.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Well Kathryn Campbell, thank you for your service and thank you for the hard work that you've put in over your career in service of the Australian people. And best of luck with what looks like it's going to be a very busy few years coming up. You're ready for it. You're fit. You were telling us before you've got the personal training, you're still ...

KATHRYN CAMPBELL: I'd adjust I think it's fair to say, because when you're allowed to get out, and that's how we're all getting out, and there's two people at a time, but what a great time it is in Canberra with the leaves changing and we're lucky we got rain in February and March so that everything's quite green. But we've been encouraging our staff to make sure that they are getting out, make sure that they do have some balance and remembering that this will pass, but there's going to be a really big challenge and there's going to be a whole lot of Australians out there who are relying on us to put in place good policies and make sure they're well delivered.

DAVID PEMBROKE: A very good message to finish our interview. So thank you to Kathryn Campbell and the next and fifth edition of Work with Purpose will feature Frances Adamson, Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and it will be recorded on Wednesday the 29th of April for publishing on Monday the 4th of May.

DAVID PEMBROKE: As I did mention at the beginning of the programme, if you do see the promotion for Work with Purpose, please pass it along. Please share it amongst your networks. And if you are feeling particularly generous, maybe even a rating or a review on your favourite podcast app, because that helps us to be found. So thank you again to Kathryn Campbell to coming into Studio 19 to share her experiences with you, the audience. And thanks to you, the audience, for coming back once again. I look forward to being with you at the same time next week, but for the moment it's bye for now.

Speaker 3: Work with Purpose is a production of contentgroup in partnership with the Institute of Public Administration Australia and with the support of the Australian Public Service Commission.

