

New JAMS CEO Brings '360-Degree' View Of ADR Giant

By James Mills

Law360 (September 26, 2024, 4:15 PM EDT) -- After filling numerous duties in her 25 years with JAMS, Kimberly Taylor is ready to use her self-described "360-degree view" of the alternative dispute resolution service as she looks toward the organization's future as its new leader.

California-based JAMS announced this week that Taylor, who has served as its president for the past three and a half years, would be replacing longtime CEO Chris Poole.

Poole, who decided to retire after 17 years leading the business, will remain involved with JAMS in the role of CEO emeritus.

Taylor, who will fill the role of CEO and president as of Tuesday, said her knowledge of "the complexities of our business and what our clients are having to deal with" will help her as CEO.

"I have the depth of experience and breadth of understanding all that goes into running this business and making sure we are providing really good value to all of the people who use our services," she said.

Law360 Pulse chatted with Taylor about how she got the job, her background and her goals for the 45-year-old organization, which has about 450 mediators/arbitrators on staff to handle cases across the country.

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Congratulations on becoming CEO! How did this all come about?

Chris let our board know at the beginning of this year that he was looking to retire in 2025. He had already been here 17 years and was ready to wind that down. When the board met to discuss a succession plan and whether to conduct an outside search, they thankfully considered my years of experience with JAMS — 25 years in a lot of different roles, overseeing operations and other parts of the organization. They made the decision to name me as Chris' successor, for which I am extremely grateful and gratified.

We've known for about six months or so that this was the plan. We settled on the Oct. 1 date to allow Chris and me to have a really smooth period transition. It really has been as seamless as something like this can be. So far, it has gone extremely well. I couldn't be happier.



Kimberly Taylor

This organization has been around for a very long time. This leadership transition is as smooth as it could possibly be. There's not going to be a lot of upheaval or drastic changes. I'm just looking forward to continuing the good work that we've already been doing and really focusing on trying to make sure we are at the top of our field in terms of how we deliver our services to our clients.

What qualities do you have that make you good for being CEO?

I think the longevity is part of it. I have definitely been here in the organization for a long time. I have been able to lead and oversee other functions besides operations. So, finance, HR, marketing, practice development. I have a 360-degree view of the organization and the people in it.

I think the fact I am a lawyer and practiced before I came to JAMS and really understand the complexities of our business and what our clients are having to deal with, really will help me as CEO. I have the depth of experience and breadth of understanding all that goes into running this business and making sure we are providing really good value to all of the people who use our services.

What are your plans for JAMS now that you're in charge?

Chris is turning over an organization that is very well run. He's been an incredible leader for the past 17 years. My primary goal is to continue his legacy and provide excellent service. The entire legal world is evolving more rapidly than it ever has with the advent of AI and other technology tools that allow us to reimagine how we deliver services so that we can remain at the forefront of the industry.

Those are my goals — to make sure we continue the great service we already provide, to continue to recruit the best and smartest neutrals, to make sure we are delivering the best case administration for the parties and to ensure we do all that as we are innovating and trying to stay at the forefront of all the things that technology can do to make our worlds better.

You recruit your neutrals? I thought they came to you.

Some providers have a roster where they pretty much admit just about anybody who comes knocking on their door. We're very deliberate about who we bring on to JAMS. When I say "recruit," it's also talking to people who approach us. We're aware of the talented people who are in the legal world, whether they're lawyers in private practice or they're mediators who have already opened up their own shop. Those judges that are looking to come off the bench, we want to make sure we are identifying the folks that live up to our values — they're highly regarded in their local communities for neutrality and fairness.

I guess I'm just talking about the whole process of identifying, vetting and welcoming in new people. We don't have any set number of neutrals that we decide that we're going to bring on in a given year or in a given location. It's really just about finding quality people, the best people we can.

Any new offices on the horizon?

We are not currently looking at any new brick-and-mortar offices, but we are recruiting and adding neutrals in locations that we're serving virtually such as Nashville. We have two terrific former judges who joined our panel about a year ago and are getting a lot of good work there. Same with Milwaukee,

Wisconsin. We're looking at other markets around the country where there is a developing need for ADR providers.

The world changed in 2020 [with the coronavirus pandemic]. There's so much we can do now virtually, and we can provide that same level of support without necessarily having a brick-and-mortar office. There may come a time when we want to have a physical presence in a place like Nashville. That would be exciting, but right now we're just focused on our current markets and adjacent markets.

The use of ADR continues to grow as more and more people use and realize its benefits. I still see a lot of upside for JAMS and other ADR providers to continue to expand their services across the country and internationally because mediation is taking hold outside of the U.S. as well.

How did you start working with JAMS?

I was based in Ventura County. I worked for a law firm there while I went to law school in the evenings. I continued to work for that firm for a few years before I became a law clerk for Justice Steve Stone, who was the presiding judge on the Court of Appeal, up there in Ventura. I clerked for him for two years.

He was excited about this new thing called arbitration and he decided that it was time for him to join JAMS. It coincided with my desire to do something a little bit different. I had taken an ADR class in law school and was very interested in the concept, but I didn't really know much about it as a business. So I joined JAMS at the same time and helped Steve establish a JAMS presence up in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties.

Then, a year into that, I was asked to lead what at the time was our Santa Monica office. After I'd been with the company about four and a half years, I moved with JAMS to New York, which was a small office at the time. There was a lot of growth potential, so they asked me to lead that. Then I ended up staying there for 16 years before I moved back to California.

I feel extremely lucky to have joined JAMS when I did and for all of the opportunities I've had along the way in different locations and having different roles and growth opportunities.

Tell us about your background.

I'm a Southern California girl. I spent most of my life in the Ventura County area until I made that big move to the East Coast. I liked my time on the East Coast, but I'm truly happy to be back in California.

Ironically, when I moved to the East Coast, that's where I met my Midwestern husband, who loves mountain biking and surfing. So, I found my California guy back in New York.

When you were in law school, what did you think you would end up specializing in?

I went to law school at the Colleges of the Law, a small private law school with locations in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. I really intended to practice in Ventura County my whole career. When I graduated law school, I could never have imagined I'd be in a business and doing something completely different.

The law firm I had been working for as a paralegal when I went to law school, I was working with a partner who did criminal defense work. In the course of my work for him, I did a lot of legal writing —

motions, briefs, that sort of thing. Then I went to the Court of Appeal as a research attorney, so I really thought I'd have a career in appellate law, that I would have my own appellate law practice. That was my goal even when I started at JAMS, recognizing that I also could use some business experience if I was going to open my law firm. Plus, I was interested in helping Steve launch this new endeavor. And I never did [open a firm]. I just stayed at JAMS.

--Editing by Robert Rudinger.

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