



NEW YORK STATE  
BAR ASSOCIATION

Report and recommendations of the  
New York State Bar Association  
**LGBTQ Law Section in Support  
of the New York State Unified  
Court System's UCS Bench Card  
and Best Practices for Judges  
"Using LGBTQ+ Inclusive Language  
and Pronouns"**

January 2023

Approved by the New York State Bar Association House of Delegates on January 20, 2023

## **Report and Resolution of the NYSBA’s LGBTQ Law Section In Support of the New York State Unified Court System’s UCS Bench Card and Best Practices for Judges “Using LGBTQ+ Inclusive Language and Pronouns”**

### **Executive Summary:**

- The LGBTQ Law Section submits this report in support of its request that NYSBA adopt as an association-wide policy use of the UCS’s Bench Card and Best Practices for Judges entitled “Using LGBTQ+ Inclusive Language and Pronouns” (the “Bench Card”).
- The Bench Card provides information and guidance to Judges to use LGBTQ+ inclusive language and pronouns, including how to interact with transgender, non-binary, and gender expansive court users in accordance with the Judicial Rules of Conduct.
- The Bench Card was developed by the Ninth Judicial District Access to Justice Committee’s LGBTQ+ Subcommittee and was adopted by the Office of Court Administration (“OCA”).

### **Report:**

The Bench Card serves as a practical guide for members of the judiciary across New York State on how to use inclusive language and pronouns in compliance with Judicial Rules of Conduct. The Bench Card includes definitions of important terms relevant to LGBTQ+ communities as well as examples of gender-inclusive language to use in the courtroom to help in avoiding misgendering people of all genders. The Bench Card demonstrates compliance with the recent changes to the ethical and professional rules that govern the conduct of attorneys and judges.<sup>1</sup>

Judges have a duty to foster an environment free of bias, prejudice, and harassment.<sup>2</sup>

The Rules of the Chief Administrative Judge require that:

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<sup>1</sup> Hyer, Wallach and Browde *Examining Judicial Civility in New York Courts for Transgender Persons in the Wake of United States v. Varner* (NYSBA Latest News 8.18.2020)

<sup>2</sup> 22 NYCRR 100.3(B)(3-5)

(4) A judge shall perform judicial duties without bias or prejudice against or in favor of any person. A judge in the performance of judicial duties shall not, by words or conduct, manifest bias or prejudice, including but not limited to bias or prejudice based upon age, race, creed, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, religion, national origin, disability, marital status or socioeconomic status, and shall require staff, court officials and others subject to the judge's direction and control to refrain from such words or conduct.<sup>3</sup>

Judges act in accordance with this rule by respecting an individual's requested pronouns. Failure to refer to someone using their preferred pronouns manifests bias and prejudice as to the individual's gender identity and gender expression. This is further expounded upon in the Judicial Ethics Opinion, where a party or attorney has advised the court that their preferred gender pronoun is "they," a judge may not require them to instead use "he" or "she."<sup>4</sup> As an ethical matter, permitting a judge to force someone to pick an ill-fitting gender pronoun would make people feel unwelcome, distract from the adjudicative process, and undermine public confidence in the judiciary's impartiality.

The LGBTQ Law Section strongly supports the adoption of the Bench Card to make New York State's courthouses more welcoming and safe spaces for members of the LGBTQ+ community. With NYSBA's adoption of the Bench Card, the LGBTQ Law Section hopes that the Bench Card will serve as a statewide resource and an example of judicial practice that can be adopted nationwide.

**Resolution:**

WHEREAS, NYSBA is committed to promoting equality in the law for LGBTQ+ people, and supports the previous adoption of the Unified Court System's Bench Card and Best

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<sup>3</sup> See 22 N.Y.C.R.R. § 100.3.

<sup>4</sup> NY Advisory Committee on Judicial Ethics, Op. 21-09 (2021)

Practices for Judges in “Using LGBTQ+ Inclusive Language and Pronouns” (the “Bench Card”) as NYSBA policy. The Bench Card, which was developed by the Ninth Judicial District Access to Justice Committee’s LGBTQ+ Subcommittee, is a guide for judges on the requirement to use inclusive language in the courtroom in the courtroom, in accordance with New York State ethical and judicial rules. It has since been adopted by the Office of Court Administration.

WHEREAS, judges have a duty to foster an environment free of bias, prejudice, and harassment.

WHEREAS, Our profession must be vigilant in protecting the LGBTQ+ community, and especially transgender individuals, within the New York State Courts and require all judges to adhere to the Rules of Judicial conduct, the Bench Card both fosters a more welcoming, gender-inclusive space while simultaneously assisting judges in removing one form of bias from the administration of justice.

NOW, THEREFORE, IT IS RESOLVED, that the New York State Bar Association supports the respectful treatment of all persons in the courtroom; and it is

FURTHER RESOLVED, that the New York State Bar Association supports the Rules of the Chief Administrative Judge that judges have a duty to foster an environment free of bias, prejudice, and harassment; and it is

FURTHER RESOLVED, that the New York State Bar Association supports the use of LGBTQ+ inclusive language and pronouns; and it is

FURTHER RESOLVED, that the New York State Bar Association supports the adoption of the “Using LGBTQ+ Inclusive Language and Pronouns” Bench Card;

FURTHER RESOLVED that the New York State Bar Association approves this report and the recommendations of the LGBTQ Law Section; and it is

FURTHER RESOLVED that the officers of the New York State Bar Association are hereby authorized to take such other and further action as may be necessary to implement this resolution.

Judges have an obligation to foster a judicial environment free of bias, prejudice, and harassment.<sup>1</sup> It is “misconduct” to discriminate based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.<sup>2</sup> Where a party or attorney has advised the court that their preferred [*chosen*] gender pronoun is “they,” a judge may not require them to instead use “he” or “she.”<sup>3</sup>

## WHAT DOES “LGBTQ+” MEAN?

The term “LGBTQ+” refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning people. LGBTQ+ is a widely used and reasonably inclusive term, including those of non-heterosexual sexual orientations and transgender people. Other shorthand terms used with some frequency include the letters “I” for “intersex,” “A” for “asexual” or “ally,” “2S” for “two-spirit” (in Native American culture) and possibly others.

## GENDER VARIANT/NEUTRAL PRONOUNS

Some persons may have a pronoun choice other than he/him/his/himself, she/her/hers/herself, or they/them/their/theirself. The pronoun list that follows is not an exhaustive list:

- **sie** (or ze, or zie)/hir/hirs/hirself
- **e**/em/es/eself
- **hi**/hem/hes/himself
- **na**/nan/nas/naself
- **per**/per/pers/perself
- **ze**/zim/zee’s/zeeself

## “TRANSGENDER” AND PRONOUN USE

“Transgender” is a broad term that includes people who do not identify with their assigned birth sex and may not conform to traditional gender expression. The term “trans\*”—with or without the asterisk—is commonly used shorthand. There are others who may choose another term such as non-binary, genderqueer, or queer. Judges and court personnel should keep in mind that being transgender, regardless of a person’s gender expression, is entirely unrelated to sexual orientation. Transgender individuals, like others, may be attracted to partners of any gender.

A key point: there is no precise measure of when the process of changing one’s gender or sex is complete. Surgery of any kind is not a prerequisite to being transgender, but for some it is a necessity. A transgender person may have some surgery, many surgeries, or no surgeries.

The process of confirming gender is sometimes referred to as transition, of which **Gender Confirmation Surgery (“GCS”)** may be just a part. GCS, sometimes referred to as bottom surgery, was once called “sex change surgery” a term now disfavored. Transition often includes social and legal components as well.

If unsure of which pronoun to use to refer to a person, **ask the person** – it is not considered rude, indeed, asking is seen by most as a sign of respect. When referring to past events of a transgender person, maintain the individual’s chosen pronouns presently in use for the historical narrative. For example, “Defendant lived with her wife until separation.”

1 22 NYCRR 100.3(B)(3-5)

2 NY RULES OF PROF’L CONDUCT r. 8.4(g) (NYS BAR ASS’N 2021).

3 NY Advisory Committee on Judicial Ethics, Op. 21-09 (2021).

## INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IN COURT

Inclusive language in the courtroom conveys the message that all people, regardless of orientation, gender identity or gender expression, will be treated with dignity and respect. Gender-inclusive language helps in avoiding misgendering people in the courtroom. When judges and lawyers share/volunteer their own pronouns, it reduces the perception that pronouns are only relevant for gender-diverse persons. If a judge becomes aware that a party is or may be transgender, the judge should consider asking questions such as:

- **What name do you usually go by?**
- **Is your birth/legal name different?**
- **Which name do you want me to use with you?**
- **How would you like to be addressed? For example, I use [the judge's pronouns].**

This shows compliance with the recent changes to the ethical and professional rules that govern the conduct of attorneys and judges.<sup>4</sup> Further,

- **Judges and attorneys can volunteer their chosen pronoun during appearances and jury introductions.**
- **Judge's pronouns can be included on courthouse/room signage.**
- **Use the name of the person or gender-neutral words such as, "folks," "guests," "jurors" and "counsel."**
- **Avoid terms and phrases that are gender-specific such as "ladies and gentlemen of the jury," "sir" and "ma'am."**
- **Realize a person's chosen pronouns may change, and that some people may have pronouns that are fluid or interchangeable (such as "she/they").**
- **Honorifics: in addition to Mr./ Ms./ Miss/ Mrs., there are gender-neutral choices, such as M. or Mx.**

<sup>4</sup> Hyer, Wallach and Browde *Examining Judicial Civility in New York Courts for Transgender Persons in the Wake of United States v. Varner* (NYSBA Latest News 8.18.2020)

## IMPORTANT TERMS TO KNOW

**AFAB/AMAB:** Assigned female at birth/ Assigned male at birth. Acronyms indicating that the individual's assigned sex at birth was in error.

**Gender Confirmation Surgery ("GCS"):** sometimes referred to as "bottom surgery," was once called "sex change surgery" a term now disfavored.

**Gender expression:** the way a person demonstrates their gender through outward manifestations such as clothing, mannerisms, style, etc.; this may not match gender identity.

**Gender identity:** an individual's perception of their own gender.

**Gender non-binary:** Identifying as neither male nor female.

**Gender nonconforming:** Not identifying with a recognized gender.

**Intersex:** A term used to describe natural differences in sexual development/traits that affect approximately 1.7% of the population.

**MBT/WBT:** man born trans/ woman born trans

## DISFAVORED TERMS

**FTM (female to male) and MTF (male to female):** acronyms indicating that a person has transitioned from one sex to the other.

**Transsexual:** A person that has transitioned medically from one sex or gender to another (disfavored due to the "change" implication).

## TERMS TO AVOID

hermaphrodite, she-male, he-she, tranny, transvestite.

Within the LGBTQ+ community there has been a reclamation of some words historically used pejoratively against LGBTQ+ persons. Ex. Some folks use "queer" and "dyke" as positive, respectful terms. Although LGBTQ+ people may use these terms, they are often seen as derogatory when used by others. **Exercise extreme caution with respect to such words.**



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January 3, 2023

TO: NYSBA Reports Group

Cc: NYSBA LGBTQ Law Section

FROM: NYSBA Committee on Legal Aid

RE: Comment on Report and Resolution of the NYSBA's LGBTQ Law Section  
In Support of the New York State Unified Court System's UCS Bench  
Card and Best Practices for Judges "Using LGBTQ+ Inclusive Language  
and Pronouns"

The NYSBA Committee on Legal Aid (COLA) submits this comment to express strong support for the Report and Resolution of the NYSBA's LGBTQ Law Section In Support of the New York State Unified Court System's UCS Bench Card and Best Practices for Judges "Using LGBTQ+ Inclusive Language and Pronouns". COLA lauds the Office of Court Administration for adopting the Bench Card, "Using LGBTQ+ Inclusive Language and Pronouns" as a guide to ensure that LGBTQ individuals, whether lawyers, litigants, jurors, or others, are treated with respect and dignity throughout their experience in the courts. The NYSBA Committee on Legal Aid's membership consists of leaders of legal service providers across the state, law schools and those committed to equal access to justice for all and therefore to the provision of free legal aid in the essentials of life to those in need. These legal services organizations serve New York's most vulnerable persons and, by number of employees, function as the largest front-line law firms in New York State. Within these organizations, we have LGBTQ individuals represented at all levels of staffing from Executive Directors to intake staff. All of our organizations serve LGBTQ





individuals, and many of our organizations have programs that specifically focus on the legal needs of LGBTQ individuals, especially those who have faced discrimination or persecution due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. It is with this background that we firmly state our support for the LGBTQ Law Sections Report and Resolutions regarding the Bench Card.

While discrimination based on sexual orientation has been prohibited in New York State since 2002, and discrimination based on gender identity and expression as been prohibited since 2019, it has been the experience of many of our lawyers and clients that the application of these laws in the Court Room has been inconsistent. Our own attorneys have experienced and witnessed mis-gendering in the Court room by judges and have witnessed such behavior used as a harassment and intimidation tool by opposing parties. The Office of Court Administration has taken leadership to modify Section 100.3 of the Rules of the Chief Administrative Judge to explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identity and gender expression in the judicial rules against bias in the courtroom, but sadly discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity have not been eradicated from the court houses. Therefore, it is critical that further steps be taken to educate Judges and their staff regarding the appropriate use of inclusive language and pronouns.

COLA supports the Unified Court System's Bench Card as a good guide for inclusive and respectful treatment of LGBTQ and especially transgender and gender non-binary individuals. We believe it should be used as a guide not only in the court room, but also in NYSBA's policies and practices.