ILLINOIS JUDICIAL BRANCH

Bench Card: Promoting Gender Inclusivity at Court

July 2025 v.2

Language, Dignity, and Respect in Court

Per the Code of Judicial Conduct, court proceedings are required to be inclusive, respectful, and free from harassment or discrimination. By using a person's correct title, name, and pronouns, judges can create welcoming court environments, promote fairness and equality, and build trust. Gender-inclusive language helps judges correctly address court users and staff, lawyers, and other judges, thereby affirming identity and dignity for all.

What are pronouns?

Pronouns are simply words used as substitutes for nouns. *Personal pronouns* are substitutes for names or nouns referring to people and are often gendered.

Examples of personal pronouns:

- She/her/hers – *feminine gender*
- He/him/his – *masculine gender*
- They/them/theirs – *gender neutral*

Pronouns are *never preferred*, but rather just are and should be respected as part of a person's identity. Pronouns can represent the gender binary, be gender neutral, or a mix of both (e.g., she/they).

Gender Binary: understanding and describing a person's gender in terms of the categories of "man/masculine" or "woman/feminine."

Gender Neutral: not using gender to describe someone (e.g., "person" instead of "man" or "woman."

All people use pronouns in language to refer to themselves and refer to others. Transgender people are not the only people who use pronouns. Cisgender people do also. If you are uncomfortable using a person's correct pronouns, use the person's name instead of using a pronoun in place of the name.

Sharing Pronouns creates an inclusive environment for transgender court users

For more information, please see**, Illinois Judicial Bench Card: Transgender People at Court.**

For more information on addressing bias in court, please see **Illinois Judicial Bench Card: Achieving Fairness Free of Unconscious Bias.**

How to Share Pronouns

You might think you can assume a person's pronouns based on their appearance, but the only way to be certain of this information is if the person tells you. If you do not know the person's pronouns, use their name instead.

Sharing your own pronouns is one way to signal that it is safe for another person to share their pronouns with you if they wish. *Here are places you could share your pronouns:*

During your court call: "Good morning, everyone, my name is Judge Doe and I use she/her pronouns."

In your Zoom name: You can personalize your Zoom name to include your pronouns. Sign in to the Zoom web portal. In the navigation panel, click Profile. On the right side of your name, click Edit. In the Pronouns field, enter your pronouns. In the "How would you like to share your pronouns?" drop-down field, choose an option. Click Save.

Examples include:
Judge Jane Doe (she/her)
Judge Sam Doe, they/them
Judge Jack Doe - he/him

On your bench name placard: Consider personalizing a permanent part of your desk to share your pronouns with people in your courtroom.

In your email signature:

Judge Chris A. Doe
Pronouns: he/him/his
Circuit Judge

Note: Pronouns are used in languages other than English too. When considering how to share your pronouns, consider incorporating pronouns in languages used by the communities you serve.

Examples of pronouns in English and Spanish:

She/her/ella
He/him/él
They/them/elle

Gender Neutral Practices

Etiquette and Procedure

Courts have procedures and formalities that are gendered. Being careful about what terms you use will ensure you are as inclusive as possible.

- When using formality in addressing the person, such as using "ma'am" and "sir" or "Ms." and "Mr." before a person's name and you do not know how a person wants to be referred, use the person's case role and last name ("Attorney Garcia"; "Petitioner Smith"; "Defendant Jones"). Alternativity, **use "Mx." (pronounced "mix")** with the person's last name.
- Use gender neutral alternatives if you do not know how parties identify. For example, rather than saying "mother and father", default to "parents." Once parties have self-identified, use the terms they have identified with.
- When describing a person, replace "woman," "man," or a gendered position ("policeman", "fireman") with the person's role at court, which is usually gender neutral ("the witness"; "the clerk"; "the court reporter").
- When describing a person's relationship with someone else, use the gender neutral, "partner," "sibling," "child," etc. instead of "wife," "brother," "daughter," etc. until you know the terms the parties use.
- Note: judges should address misgendering if case participants use incorrect terms in court. Please see Illinois Judicial Bench Card: Transgender People at Court.

Gender Neutral Writing

When writing about or to an unknown person or group of people, use gender neutral pronouns and nouns. Use inclusive language and avoid gender-based assumptions in your writing, such as assuming a person's role, profession, or experience based on gender. Note**:** If gender is not relevant, do not mention it. When writing legal documents, consider the level of specificity that is needed when describing a person.

Singular They

The singular *they* is an accepted grammatical convention that allows you to refer to an individual without a gendered pronoun. The singular *they* can be used to refer to people whose gender is not known or who do not identify along the gender binary (e.g., non-binary people). When writing about an unknown group of people, or a person who does not identify as a "man" or "woman", avoid the use of "he/she" and "he or she" because it implies that the person identifies in the gender binary, and instead use the singular "they."

Gender Neutral Spoken or Signed Language

When addressing groups: replace gendered language with gender neutral alternatives.

- Instead of "ladies and gentlemen" or "men and women of the jury" try: "Good morning, everyone." or "Hello, jury or jurors."

When addressing individuals: Start by sharing your pronouns. Sharing your pronouns invites others to share their pronouns. (For more information on pronouns, see page 1.) You must know a person's name or pronouns in order to know how to address them. If the person has not already shared their pronouns or name**, you can ask in the following ways:**

- "My pronouns are she/hers. Would you like to share your pronouns?
- "How would you like me to address you?"
- "How would you like to be referred to?"
- "I don't want to use the wrong name. What name do you use?"

As discussed in "Transgender People at Court", it is impossible to tell who is transgender and who is not. It is the trans person's right to share this information. You should not ask. However, on some occasions, gender identity is necessary and relevant because you need to explain specific information or make other case determinations that center on gender identity. In that situation, you could say, (in chambers, if possible, out of earshot of others):

- "When it comes to services that may be gender-based, what do you need?

What if the legal name for a litigant is different from the name they have chosen?

Always use the litigant's chosen name unless you *must* use the legal name. Then, explain why you must use their legal name in that particular instance and *always use their shared pronouns.*