

Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission

State Report 2015

In December 2015, the New York State Chief Judge appointed a new Commission Chair, Hon. Richard B. Lowe III, Presiding Justice, Appellate Term, First Department. The Chief Judge also appointed six new Commission members: Lenora B. Foote, Esq., Executive Assistant to the Hon. Gerald Whalen, Presiding Justice of the 4th Department; Hon. Craig D. Hannah, Buffalo City Court; Hon. Barbara R. Kapnick, Associate Justice of the Appellate Division, First Department; Paul Kenny, Esq., Chief Clerk of the Appellate Term, Second Department; Hon. Joanne D. Quiñones, Criminal Court, Kings County, and Hon. Richard Rivera, Albany Family Court.

The Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission is charged with the responsibility of monitoring the representation and treatment of persons of color throughout the court system, including judges, court personnel, and support staff. In addition, we develop programs to make the system fair to persons of color and to improve diversity within the courts.

The major event that the Commission undertook in 2015 was the hosting of the 27th Annual Conference of the National Consortium on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts in Buffalo, New York. The Conference, “Uniting Communities: Justice for All”, allowed the Commission to partner with leaders in the community, courts, bar associations, and law schools to develop an exceptional program examining pressing issues in the legal community affecting persons of color. Commission members worked to assemble speakers, panelists, and moderators from around the country including national and local politicians, educators, judges, attorneys, law enforcement officials and community leaders.

At the Conference, workshops explored pressing issues such as zero tolerance in the schools, domestic violence, alternatives to incarceration, the Voting Rights Act, innovations in peacemaking and immigration consequences of convictions. Also receiving focus was the issue of "implicit bias," and the role that hidden bias plays in decision-making unless one is made aware of this influence. The centerpiece of the Conference was a Town Hall Meeting on improving law enforcement and police relationships within communities of color. The panelists discussed various perspectives regarding the root of the tension between law enforcement and communities of color and suggested reforms and approaches to protect the inhabitants of these various communities.

On October 22, 2015, the Commission continued its fourth statewide initiative to host seminars on the path to becoming a judge in districts that lack diversity in the judiciary. The Commission partnered with the Onondaga County Bar Association to host the program titled "Everything You Need to Know About Becoming a Judge." The seminar included panel discussions on election law, ethical requirements, securing the nomination in Supreme Court, making the ballot in town, city, county and family courts, evaluation, judicial and appointment processes. Continuing legal education credit was provided for attendees and the program closed with a reception for further networking. These seminars have been very successful and various bar associations have reached out to the Commission to sponsor similar programs in their districts.

Commission members conducted the New York State Judicial Institute annual class for new judges on implicit bias and cultural awareness and distributed the Commission's booklet, "Cultural Awareness Tips for Judges and Court Personnel."

For more information about the Commission, visit www.nycourts.gov/ip/ethnic-fairness/