

Matthew Skinner, Esq. was appointed executive director of the New York State Unified Court System's Richard C. Failla LGBTQ Commission in December 2017. The Commission was created in 2016 to promote equal participation and access throughout the court system regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. It was named in honor of New York State Supreme Court Justice and LGBTQ rights advocate Richard C. Failla, who was the first openly gay person elected to that court. Skinner was previously executive director of LeGal, the LGBT Bar Association and Foundation of Greater New York.

What three words would you use to describe your current role?

Past, present and future. I try to honor all three We want to acknowledge the court's complicated past with the LGBTQ community, and move forward with strength in the present into the future. We are always working to make a court system that provides access and equality for the LGBTQ community.

Can you describe the importance of the Failla LGBTQ Commission to the New York State court system, and what you hope to bring to your new position?

We see it as a platform that gives the LGBTQ community an official voice ...that creates an open channel with senior leadership in the court system...it's a way to bring our concerns, our dynamism, our rich diverse experiences into play and be part of the tapestry that is the court system.

What is the current focus of the commission?

The transgender community has some very specific challenges when it comes to navigating the courts, and public life generally. The Commission is instrumental in amending the court system's anti-discrimination policy to explicitly prohibit discrimination based on gender identity and gender expression. It creates and implements training at court system conferences to provide best practices and respectful terminology. We are currently working on a template for bathroom signage to let the transgender community know it is welcome to use the rest rooms in the various court houses of the court system. We are in the final stages and planning for signs to go up in 2019.

In addition, we had a very busy Pride month in June, with events in every JD around the state. We are proud of how many geographic areas we were able to cover and bring our message to.... One particularly great event was held at 60 Centre Street, where we honored the 45th Anniversary of William Thom, the first openly gay judge, who successfully petitioned for the formal incorporation of Lambda, which he founded in 1973.

What is your biggest professional achievement to date?

When Judge Paul Feinman was appointed to the Court of Appeals in June 2017, I was still the executive director of LeGal, the LGBT Bar Association and Foundation of Greater New York. I was involved in the lobbying effort to pick him and it was just a watershed moment for the community--it felt like we had really arrived.

Describe a typical day in your professional life.

A lot of phone calls and emails, committee meetings, events I go to in the evening to support LGBTQ organizations. I regularly travel and make sure we maintain strong relationships with people on the ground throughout the state. I am committed to bringing the work of the commission into the modern world of social media, so part of my day is allocated to that...we have a very active twitter account [@nycourts.lgbtq](https://twitter.com/nycourts.lgbtq), as well as video presence on YouTube. We are committed to strengthening our virtual presence.

Who do you consider a mentor and why?

I have worked with many of the trailblazing gay judges on the Commission, including current co-chairs, Appellate Justices Marcy Kahn and Joanne Winslow, as well as Presiding Justice Elizabeth Garry of the Appellate Division—all of whom have been great models of leadership and integrity. They're wonderful teachers on how to handle a lot of varied, complicated challenges, work very hard and remain collegial, friendly and supportive.

How would you advise prospective LGBTQ applicants to the court system?

Consider building your career here. There is a wonderful community waiting for you. When you put your mind to it, it is possible to raise to the top levels, the sky is really the limit these days.

Before you leave this position, what would you like your greatest achievement to have been?

I would really like the members of the LGBTQ community to really feel able to bring their whole selves to the courts, no matter what part of the state they are in, to feel they are part of an even playing field--both for the staff who work in the courts and those who use and need our court system every day.