Equitable Language for Inclusive Communication

Introduction:

Language is a powerful tool for enacting social and systems change. It affects our work and shapes the way we talk about our work. Research shows stigma contributes to negative treatment of people. It is important to be purposeful with the language we use. This will help address stigma within systems.

Equity-centered writing:

• Represents people or communities positively.

• Frames inequities as problems within systems, not as deficits in people.

• Supports strength-based messaging.

Equitable language efforts are evolving. There are no perfect methods. This information is a broad overview of key terms and concepts. It is not a definitive list of words to avoid using or words to use.

In addition, this resource is:

• A starting point for reflection as you write about your work.
• A tool for conversation with your Council staff or Council members.

A note about the suggestions and the DD Act:

The DD Act of 2000 includes some terms that are outdated. It is hard for laws and policies to stay current with ongoing language advocacy efforts. We recommend using equitable language where possible and in your public-facing written materials.

Person First and Identity First Language

Both terms promote autonomy and empower identity. The language used should be the preferred language of the group of people you are focusing on.

Intended audience: Council staff; Reading grade level 9.3

Some Councils have adopted statements around the use of Person First and Identity First. This shows support of the disability community no matter their preferred use of wording when referring to themselves.

The Suggestions and Guidance:

The suggestions below may support an inclusive approach to DD Council communications.

We used the [CDC's Health Equity Guiding Principles for Inclusive Communication, Preferred Terms, November 2022](#) as the primary resource for this information.

The charts below show words and terms to avoid, and suggestions for preferred terms for select groups.

We understand there may not be agreement on the terms. Focus is given to avoiding unintentional blaming. The words in the left column may not have a one-to-one match with a word in the right column.

PEOPLE WHO ARE AT INCREASED RISK OR HIGHER RISK

Avoid using terms such as:	Instead use…
• *Vulnerable groups* • *Marginalized groups* • *High-risk groups* • *At-risk groups* • *High-burden groups* • *Hard to reach groups.* • *Targeted population*	• Groups that have been economically/social marginalized • Groups that have been historically marginalized or historically excluded. • Communities that are underserved by/with limited access to [specific resource or service]. • Groups placed at higher risk/put at higher risk of [outcome]. • Groups experiencing disadvantage because of [reason]. • Population of focus • Under-resourced communities • People who are at increased/higher risk for [condition]. • Populations/groups disproportionately affected by [condition]. • Populations/groups highly affected by [condition].

These terms on the left imply the condition is inherent to the group rather than the actual causal factors.

Consider using terms and language which focus on the systems in place.

Intended audience: Council staff; Reading grade level 9.3

Avoid using…	Instead use…
• *Target communities for interventions* • *Target population* • *Tackle issues within the community* • *Aimed at communities.*	• Engage • Prioritize • Consider the needs of • Tailor to the needs of • Population of focus

Avoid words with a violent suggestion when referring to people, groups, or communities. Examples are target, tackle, or combat.

Avoid using stakeholder to mean partner.

Note: The word "stakeholder" may have a violent suggestion for tribes and urban Indian groups.

Stakeholders are people who may be affected by a course of action. Preferred terms include community members and persons affected by [policy/program/practice], partners collaborators, allies, community engagement, tribal engagement, urban Indian conferment.

ACCESS and ACCESS to SERVICES and RESOURCES

Avoid using…	Instead use…
• *Unserved* • *Underserved*	People who are unserved/underserved

"Underserved" relates to a lack of access to services.

LOWER SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

Avoid using…	Instead use…
• *Poverty stricken.* • *The poor* • *Poor people*	• People with lower incomes • People or households with incomes below the federal poverty level • People experiencing poverty

Intended audience: Council staff; Reading grade level 9.3

UNINTENTIONAL BLAMING

Avoid saying	Instead use…
• People who refuse [vaccination, waiver services]. • People who do not use PPE. • People who do not seek healthcare.	• People who have yet to receive/do [vaccination/specific behavior]. • People with limited access to [specific service/resource]. • People under-resourced with [specific service/resource].

Consider the context and the audience to determine if language used could potentially lead to negative assumptions, stereotyping, stigmatization, or blame. However, these terms may be appropriate in some instances.

Do not assume that people are refusing or choosing not to participate in a behavior or access a service because access, acceptability, or other structural issues may play a role.

NON-US BORN PERSONS/IMMIGRATION STATUS

Avoid using…	Instead use…
• Illegals • Illegal immigrants • Illegal aliens • Illegal migrants • Foreigners • The foreign-born	• People with undocumented status • Mixed-status households • Immigrant, migrant • Asylee or asylum seeker • Refugee or refugee populations • Non-U.S. born person(s)/foreign-born person(s) • Non-U.S. born persons/Immigration Status

Intended audience: Council staff; Reading grade level 9.3

The term "alien" (a person who is not a citizen of the United States) may be stigmatizing in some contexts and should only be used in technical documents or when referring to or using immigration law terminology.

Use accurate and clearly defined terms when referring to foreign-born people. For example, do not use "refugee" if you mean "immigrant".

If combining subpopulations in writing, ensure America Indians and Alaska Natives from tribes located in what is now called the United States are not included in the "immigrant" category.

OLDER ADULTS

Avoid using…	Instead use…
• Elderly • Senior • Frail • Fragile	• Older adults • Persons aged [numeric age group] (e.g., people aged 55-64 years) • Elders when referring to older adults in a cultural context

Tribes, American Indian and Alaska Native urban communities, and federal agencies define American Indian and Alaska Native Elders aged 55 years and higher.

RACE and ETHNICITY

Avoid using	Instead use…

• Referring to people as their race/ethnicity (e.g., Blacks, Hispanics, Latinos, Whites, American Indians, etc.
• Referring to people as colored people, colored Indian (to refer to American Indian)
• Native American
• Eskimo
• Oriental
• Afro-American
• Negro
	• Racial groups
	  ○ American Indian or Alaska Native persons/communities/populations
	  ○ Asian persons
	  ○ Black or African American persons; Black persons
	  ○ Native Hawaiian persons
	  ○ Pacific Islander persons
	  ○ White persons
	  ○ People who identify with more than one race/ethnicity, people of more than one race/ethnicity, people of multiple races

Intended audience: Council staff; Reading grade level 9.3

- *Caucasian*
- *The [racial/ethnic] community (e.g., the Black community).*
- *Non-White (used with or without specifying non-Hispanic or Latino)*

- Ethnic Groups:
  - Hispanic or Latino persons
  - When describing a combination of racial/ethnic groups (for example, 3 or more sub-groups) use "people from some racial and ethnic groups" or "people from racial and ethnic minority groups".

- Consider racial/ethnic groups as proper nouns and capitalize (e.g., Black, Hispanic).
- "People/communities of color" is a frequently used term. Use only when included groups are defined upon first use; be mindful to refer to a specific racial/ethnic group(s) instead of this collective term when the experience is different across groups. Some groups consider the term "people of color" as an unnecessary and binary option (people of color vs. White people), and some people do not identify with the term "people of color".
- American Indian and Alaska Natives are the only federally recognized political minority in the United States. Tribes hold a unique government to government relationship with the United States.
- "American Indian or Alaska Native" should only be used to describe persons with different tribal affiliations or when the tribal affiliations are not known or not known to be the same. Other terms, "tribal communities/populations" or "indigenous communities/populations," could also be used to refer to groups with multiple tribal affiliations. Otherwise, identify persons or groups by their specific tribal affiliation.
- The term "Indian Country" describes reservations, lands held within tribal jurisdictions, and areas with American Indian populations. "Indian Country" is generally used in context and is rarely used as a stand-alone – it typically is used in writing only after "American Indian or Alaska Native" (AI/AN) has already been used, and the writer wants to avoid continuing to repeat AI/AN or "tribes" and refer more broadly to the general wide community of AI/AN peoples and tribes. Within context, there shouldn't be any confusion about it referring to the Asian country, India.
- Latinx has been proposed as a gender-neutral English term, but there is debate around its use. Its use may be considered on an audience-specific basis.
- Latino (individual man, group of men, or group of people including men and women)
- Latina (individual woman or group of women)

RURAL

Avoid using…	Instead use…
• *Rural people* • *Frontier people*	• People who live in rural/sparsely populated areas

Intended audience: Council staff; Reading grade level 9.3

- Residents/populations of rural areas
- Rural communities

SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

Avoid using…	Instead use…
• *Sexual preference* • *Gendered, binary language, when not necessary* • *Transgendered/transsexual* • *Homosexual*	• Lesbian, gay, or bisexual (when referring to self-identified sexual orientation) • Queer • Pansexual • Asexual • Transgender • Non-binary • Genderqueer • Gender diverse • Gender non-conforming • LGBTQ or LGBTQIA+ or LGBTQ+ or LGBTQIA2

- Use LGBTQ community (and not, e.g., gay community) to reflect the diversity of the community unless a specific sub-group is meant to be referenced.
- Consider using the terms "sexual orientation", "gender identity", and "gender expression".
- Use gender-neutral language whenever possible (e.g., avoid "Chairman" and consider "Chair" instead).
- Consider using terms that are inclusive of all gender identities (e.g., parents; advocates).
- Be aware that not every family is the same, and that some children are not being raised by their biological parents. Build flexibility in communications and surveys to allow full participation.
- The word homosexual has a clinical history as it used to be classified as a mental illness in the DSM (it was removed from the DSM in 1973, but those with an anti-gay agenda still use the word today).
- GLAAD (**Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation**+listed Homosexual as offensive in 2006. They point out that, since it includes "sexual," the word focuses on sexual acts and not on gay men and women's basic humanity. Also, the word is related to a recognizable slur, "homo."

Intended audience: Council staff; Reading grade level 9.3

Additional resources:

To find more resources, search the internet with terms such as:

- equitable language
- bias-free language
- inclusive language
- other similar terms

Below are resources that you may find helpful. This is not a complete list of resources available on this topic.

Bias-Free Language

APA guidelines for writing.
Source: American Psychological Association (APA)

Inclusive language | 18F Content Guide

Source: U.S. General Services Administration

PARC Suggested Language List

Source: Prevention, Advocacy & Resource Center (PARC)/ Brandeis University

Proud & Supported

Definitions and beyond for LGBTQ+ people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Intended audience: Council staff; Reading grade level 9.3