



## 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 has demonstrated that stigmatizing language can negatively impact how someone is treated. Therefore, it is important to be intentional with the language we use to combat stigma within systems.

Equity-centered writing supports strength-based messaging or talking about people or communities in a positive way, while also highlighting inequities within systems. It's important to frame inequities as problems within systems, not deficiencies within people. The underlying idea is that if we notice a disparity, or difference, in health outcomes that has to do with inadequate, poorly designed, or outdated systems. This information is offered as a guide to DD Council staff in using and sharing language that supports equity work.

There are no perfect methods. Equitable language efforts are continually evolving alongside new research and ongoing advocacy efforts. Additionally, the specific communities within your region, city, or state, may have preferred language that has evolved out of your local context. This information is a broad overview of key terms and concepts and not a definitive list of words to avoid using or words to use. This resource is intended to serve as a starting point for reflection as you write about your work and could be used as a tool for conversation with your Council staff or Council members.

***A note about the suggestions and the DD Act:*** It is important to note that the DD Act was published in 2000, therefore, some of the terms included below are not representative of current best practices. Some terms we would not use today may be used in federal legislation. Equitable language efforts are constantly evolving, and is difficult for legislation, laws, or statutes to keep pace with ongoing advocacy efforts. We recommend adopting more equitable language where possible and in newer public-facing written materials.

### *Additional resources:*

Below are resources that you may find helpful. This is not a complete list of resources available on this topic. If you are interested in seeking more resources, you can search the internet with terms such as equitable language, bias-free language, inclusive language, and other similar terms.

- [Bias-Free Language](#)  
APA guidelines cover many important topics, including age, disability, racial and ethnic identity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status  
Source: American Psychological Association (APA)
- [Conscious & Unconscious Biases in Health Care](#)  
National Center for Cultural Competence at Georgetown University  
Courses that focus on conscious and unconscious biases in health care and their impact on people who are disproportionately affected by disparities.
- [Inclusive language | 18F Content Guide](#)  
Guidance for writing and talking about diverse groups of people  
Source: U.S. General Services Administration
- [PARC Suggested Language List](#)  
A tool to share information and suggestions about language usage.  
Source: [Prevention, Advocacy & Resource Center \(PARC\)](#)/ Brandeis University
- [Proud & Supported](#)  
Proud & Supported is a project to support LGBTQ+ people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and more. The project is funded by the New York State Developmental Disabilities Planning Council

### *A Note about Person First and Identity First Language*

Person first and identity first language are important distinctions to promote autonomy and empower identity. Depending on the audience the language used should be the preferred language of that group. Some Councils have adapted statements around the use of Person First and Identity First to support the disability community no matter their preferred use of terminology when referring to themselves. With the ever-changing culture and norms for how people with disabilities choose to be identified, it is best practice to assume good intent and have grace with the language others use when referring to this population.

### *Suggestions and Guidance:*

The suggestions below may help inform an inclusive approach to DD Council communications. The information below is modeled after the CDC's Health Equity Guiding Principles for Inclusive Communication, Preferred Terms, August 2022.

The charts below are presented in a format of words and terms to avoid, and suggestions to support preferred terms for select groups while understanding there may not always be agreement on the terms, and 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**

<i><b>Avoid using terms such as:</b></i>	<i><b>Instead use...</b></i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Vulnerable groups</i></li> <li><i>Marginalized groups</i></li> <li><i>High-risk groups</i></li> <li><i>At-risk groups</i></li> <li><i>High-burden groups</i></li> <li><i>Hard to reach groups.</i></li> <li><i>Targeted population</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Groups that have been economically/social marginalized</li> <li>Groups that have been historically marginalized or historically excluded.</li> <li>Communities that are underserved by/with limited access to [specific resource or service].</li> <li>Groups placed at higher risk/put at higher risk of [outcome].</li> <li>Groups experiencing disadvantage because of [reason].</li> <li>Population of focus</li> <li>Under-resourced communities</li> <li>People who are at increased/higher risk for [condition].</li> <li>Populations/groups disproportionately affected by [condition].</li> <li>Populations/groups highly affected by [condition].</li> </ul>

These terms can be stigmatizing, are vague and imply that the condition is inherent to the group rather than the actual causal factors.

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

<i><b>Avoid using...</b></i>	<i><b>Instead use...</b></i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Target communities for interventions</i></li> <li>• <i>Target population</i></li> <li>• <i>Tackle issues within the community</i></li> <li>• <i>Aimed at communities.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage</li> <li>• Prioritize</li> <li>• Consider the needs of</li> <li>• Tailor to the needs of</li> <li>• Population of focus</li> </ul>

Avoid saying target, tackle, combat, or other terms with violent connotation when referring to people, groups, or communities.

Avoid using stakeholder to mean partner.

*Note: Stakeholder may have a particularly violent connotation for tribes and urban Indian organizations.*

Stakeholders are persons 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**

<i><b>Avoid using...</b></i>	<i><b>Instead use...</b></i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Unservd</i></li> <li>• <i>Underserved</i></li> </ul>	People who are unserved/underserved

“Underserved” relates to a lack of access to services. You would not want to use the word “underserved” if you really mean “disproportionately affected”.

## **LOWER SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS**

<i><b>Avoid using...</b></i>	<i><b>Instead use...</b></i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Poverty stricken.</i></li> <li>• <i>The poor</i></li> <li>• <i>Poor people</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People with lower incomes</li> <li>• People or households with incomes below the federal poverty level</li> <li>• People experiencing poverty</li> </ul>

## UNINTENTIONAL BLAMING

<i>Avoid saying</i>	<i>Instead use...</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>People who refuse [vaccination, waiver services].</i></li> <li>• <i>People who do not use PPE</i></li> <li>• <i>People who do not seek healthcare.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People who have yet to receive/do [vaccination/specific behavior].</li> <li>• People with limited access to [specific service/resource].</li> <li>• People under-resourced with [specific service/resource].</li> </ul>

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 – access, acceptability, or other structural issues may play a role.

## NON-US BORN PERSONS/IMMIGRATION STATUS

<i>Avoid using...</i>	<i>Instead use...</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Illegals</i></li> <li>• <i>Illegal immigrants</i></li> <li>• <i>Illegal aliens</i></li> <li>• <i>Illegal migrants</i></li> <li>• <i>Foreigners</i></li> <li>• <i>The foreign-born</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People with undocumented status</li> <li>• Mixed-status households</li> <li>• Immigrant, migrant</li> <li>• Asylee or asylum seeker</li> <li>• Refugee or refugee populations</li> <li>• Non-U.S. born person(s)/foreign-born person(s)</li> <li>• Non-U.S. born persons/Immigration Status</li> </ul>

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 document or when referring to or use 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

<i>Avoid using...</i>	<i>Instead use...</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Elderly</i></li> <li>• <i>Senior</i></li> <li>• <i>Frail</i></li> <li>• <i>Fragile</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Older adults</li> <li>• Persons aged [numeric age group] (e.g., people aged 55-64 years)</li> <li>• Elders when referring to older adults in a cultural context</li> </ul>

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

## RACE and ETHNICITY

<i>Avoid using</i>	<i>Instead use...</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Referring to people as their race/ethnicity (e.g., Blacks, Hispanics, Latinos, Whites, American Indians, etc.</i></li> <li>• <i>Referring to people as colored people, colored Indian (to refer to American Indian)</i></li> <li>• <i>Native American</i></li> <li>• <i>Eskimo</i></li> <li>• <i>Oriental</i></li> <li>• <i>Afro-American</i></li> <li>• <i>Negro</i></li> <li>• <i>Caucasian</i></li> <li>• <i>The [racial/ethnic] community (e.g., the Black community).</i></li> <li>• <i>Non-White (used with or without specifying non-Hispanic or Latino)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Racial groups</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ American Indian or Alaska Native persons/communities/populations</li> <li>○ Asian persons</li> <li>○ Black or African American persons; Black persons</li> <li>○ Native Hawaiian persons</li> <li>○ Pacific Islander persons</li> <li>○ White persons</li> <li>○ People who identify with more than one race/ethnicity, people of more than one race/ethnicity, people of multiple races</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Ethnic Groups:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Hispanic or Latino persons</li> <li>○ 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”.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

- Consider racial/ethnic groups as proper nouns and capitalize (e.g., Black, Hispanic).
- “People/communities of color” is a frequently used term but should only be used if 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 usage. 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...*

- *Rural people*
- *Frontier people*

### *Instead use...*

- People who live in rural/sparsely populated areas
- Residents/populations of rural areas
- Rural communities

## SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

### *Avoid using...*

- *Sexual preference*
- *Gendered, binary language, when not necessary*
- *Transgendered/transsexual*
- *Homosexual*

### *Instead use...*

- 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 into 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 or that the word is related to a recognizable slur, "homo."