

COMMUNICATIONS WITH RESPECT TO PERSONS SERVED BY DHH

I. Purpose

This policy is to ensure that in all communications persons with disabilities who are served by the department are referred to in language that is affirmative and respectful.

The intent of this policy is to provide guidance to DHH employees and to provide a foundation for training, information and educational opportunities that produce changes in the language we use that ensures respect for the people we serve.

This policy shall not be used as the basis for any disciplinary action or discrimination against any employee who fails to adopt the elements of the policy described herein.

In addition, the policy is not intended to impede accurate communication about medical diagnoses, but rather, to affirm the dignity of people with disabilities and foster positive attitudes.

II. Applicability

This policy applies to all DHH employees.

III. Implementation

The effective date of this policy is December 31, 2003. Subsequent revisions shall become effective on the date the revisions are approved and signed by the Secretary.

IV. Policy

It is the policy of the Department of Health and Hospitals to use written and oral language that reflects the individuality and dignity of the persons we serve.

- A. The Department recognizes that disability is a natural part of the human experience. It is, like gender and ethnicity, one of many characteristics of being human.
- B. The Department acknowledges that words have power, the power to shape the way people think, feel, and act towards others. When a group of people wants understanding and acceptance, attention to the language used in talking and writing about them is particularly important.
- C. Departmental employees have the opportunity to impact how people with disabilities are viewed, treated and responded to. The Department, therefore, adopts the use of positive language.

Such positive language refers to the person first, and then addresses traits or characteristics. It puts the person before the disability and describes what a person has, not what a person is. Positive language promotes understanding, respect, dignity and affirmative outlooks.

V. Guidelines for Using Positive Language

- A. In preparing documents and presentations and in general oral conversations, each employee of the Department should consider the following:
1. The people we serve are first and foremost multi-dimensional human beings like everyone else but whom, secondarily, have a disorder with which they are dealing. A person does not equate to a disability, i.e., a person may have a condition like mental retardation, but would not be referred to as a mental retardate. Likewise, it is preferable to say that a person has a disability, rather than he is disabled. Phrases such as “developmentally disabled children:” should be replaced by “children with developmental disabilities.”
 2. Ask yourself whether it is necessary to mention disability in all cases. The term should be used only when it is significant to the conversation or understanding of written material.
 3. Emphasis should to be placed on abilities, rather than limitations. Consider, for example, that wheelchairs allow people to be mobile, rather than being confined.
 4. Avoid negative words or those that sensationalize disabilities. Words like “suffer”, “tragedy”, “problem” and “afflicted” are considered offensive.
 5. “Problems” or “deficits” should be framed as needs. This is the traditional way that we refer to the supports we all need to operate, i.e., “I need glasses,” rather than “I have a visual deficit.”
 6. Avoid euphemisms such as “differently-abled,” and “special,” when what is meant is segregated. The exception is where the term “special” is used as a part of a proper name as in “Special Olympics.”
- B. It is not the intent of this policy to impede communications in medical settings. Where the general population would be referred to as “clients,” that same term is properly used in reference to persons with disabilities.

VI. Responsibility

It is the responsibility of each office/division/bureau to promote the use of positive language. The department recognizes, however, the changes demanded in this policy require a cultural shift that will not occur immediately, but over time and with support and training.

- b. Each office/division/bureau is responsible for providing orientation, training, information and educational materials regarding the use of positive language to its employees.
- c. Within each office/division/bureau, written materials, particularly those that will be shared with the public, are to be reviewed prior to distribution to ensure the use of respectful language. It is also important that positive language be used in individual planning documents and other materials written about specific individuals being served.

Notations:

A variety of resources were used in the preparation of this policy, including work by Kathie Snow at www.disabilityisnatural.com, the State of Texas Developmental Disabilities Council, Otto F. Wahl, Ph.D. at George Mason University, and the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.