

Inclusive Language Guidelines

What is inclusive language?

Inclusive language reflects and respects the diversity of its audience and individuals by focusing on people's strengths rather than challenges and placing people ahead of any personal characteristics. Inclusive language also avoids the use of certain expressions or words that may exclude or stigmatize diverse groups of people. The characteristics of diversity include, but are not limited to, dimensions such as national origin, language, race, color, disability, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status and family structures.

Inclusion is appreciating and valuing human differences by creating an atmosphere that promotes a sense of belonging: where everyone feels respected and valued for their uniqueness. In an inclusive environment each person is recognized and developed, and their skills are routinely tapped in to. In an inclusive environment people are valued because of, not in spite of, their differences so everyone can fully participate and thrive.

Inclusive language:

- Respects the inherent worth of the individual as a human being
- Places emphasis on ability.

Inclusive language DOES NOT:

- Identify people by their challenges
- Stigmatize
- Dehumanize
- Belittle

How to use this Guide

This document is a template adapted for language about poverty. There is a blank template at the end of this document that can be applied to your work area and used for the other dimensions of diversity. It is recommended that you add language specific to your needs. For example, the "Recommended Language" section of the chart (below) is one area you may want to modify/add to as you develop this Guide over time.

Why does inclusive language matter?

- Words are powerful. They can influence and reinforce perceptions of people. The words we use can create either a positive view of people or a negative view.

- How we use language is an indicator of how we *think* about the subject we are speaking about. How we think influences our actions and guides our intentions. If your intentions are to help, heal or simply not to harm, your language matters. It is important to be **intentional** in your use of language. You might need to train yourself to think and use language in a new way.
- Using language that is respectful of people’s unique needs and abilities is a way to value everyone and to make our programs and services more accessible.
- Some phrases or words that were used to refer to or label people in the past are now considered out-dated, insensitive and offensive. Many of these older phrases or words can exclude and stigmatize people.
- Regional staff are in a position of power and it is important to recognize the impact that language has on the people we serve.
- The use of inclusive language can create change and positively impact our interactions with citizens and each other.
- Regional staff are committed to working and serving people first – processes and forms are tools we use for our programs and services.
- Inclusive language encourages a welcoming environment for the community and staff.
- The use of inclusive language aligns with our Regional values (service, integrity, respect, innovation, collaboration) and related behaviours associated with each value.

Suggested Guidelines for Inclusive Language

It is important to recognize that language evolves over time, and that there is no ‘right’ answer to inclusive language. We are all learning and we will make mistakes along the way as part of the learning process. Think of your good **intentions** and let that be your guide.

Guidelines	Rationale	Recommended Language
Use person-first language and when possible, get to know someone’s name and refer to them by name.	Person-first language places people ahead of any personal characteristics. Our common ground is that we are all human beings worthy of respect.	Use: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Person currently experiencing poverty” or • “Person living with a low income”. Instead of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Poor person”, • “Downtrodden”, etc.
Take time to listen and learn from people.	To improve communication, do not be afraid to ask people what words or phrases they	Use: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How do you describe your

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	<p>prefer or identify with.</p> <p>Be genuine, kind and positive when listening and seeking clarity.</p>	<p>situation”? ” or</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What words best describe your experience?” <p>Instead of: Assuming the correct language to use or asking someone if they are living in poverty.</p>
<p>Focus on strengths while paying attention to unique needs.</p>	<p>Recognizing strengths allows for a focus on opportunities and solutions rather than just problems. However, do not discount the unique needs and challenges people currently face or have overcome!</p>	<p>Highlight people’s unique strengths such as “resourceful”, “resilient”, “personable” – the list is endless.</p> <p>Instead of: describing a person or the person’s situation as “disadvantaged, disenfranchised, downtrodden”.</p>
<p>Be mindful of how language can rank and prioritize people.</p>	<p>Avoid terms that rank people whenever possible. You will find this challenging! Our society is based on ranking and avoiding it altogether will be nearly impossible.</p> <p>Avoiding terms that rank people helps level the playing field by creating equity (fairness) in language.</p> <p>Ranking focuses on differences rather than similarities.</p> <p>Avoiding terms that rank people is based on the belief that all people have inherent value and therefore have something to contribute.</p>	<p>Use: We meet people “where they are at”</p> <p>Instead of: Identifying people at different “levels”</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “hit rock bottom or moving up in society” • “High end user of services” • Moving down to a person’s level. • Upper and lower class • High and low risk neighbourhood
<p>Avoid language that passes judgement, blames and makes assumptions.</p>	<p>Avoid language that passes judgement or blame.</p> <p>While you may not be able to ‘walk a mile in their shoes’, you can deepen your understanding of their unique situation by listening to their story. What are the underlying causes of their behaviour?</p>	<p>Seek to understand and appreciate each individual’s experience.</p> <p>Instead of characterizing a person living with low income as lazy, unmotivated, non-compliant, service resistant, uncooperative, etc.</p>
<p>Avoid using aggressive language.</p>	<p>Aggressive language portrays a militaristic view of the world which implies that people are against or at war with each other.</p>	<p>Use: Direct support worker, shorter or longer term goal, direct support.</p> <p>Instead of: front line worker, target, in the trenches, on the</p>

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Avoid descriptions that refer to personal attributes unless they are relevant.	If a personal attribute is not relevant to the program or service we provide, then do not include this information in your description of the person.	radar, etc.
Use plain, clear and respectful language.	Acronyms and clichés should be avoided. Using plain, clear language complies with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act and makes our communication more accessible.	

Blank Template to Apply to Specific Work Areas

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Use person-first language and when possible, get to know someone's name and refer to them by name.	Person-first language places people ahead of any personal characteristics. Our common ground is that we are all human beings worthy of respect.	<p>Use:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Person currently experiencing _____” or • “Person living with _____”. <p>Instead of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Poor person”, • “Downtrodden”, etc.
Take time to listen and learn from people.	<p>To improve communication, do not be afraid to ask people what words or phrases they prefer or identify with.</p> <p>Be genuine, kind and positive when listening and seeking clarity.</p>	<p>Use:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How do you describe your situation?” or • “What words best describe your experience?” <p>Instead of: Assuming the correct language to use or asking someone if they are living in _____.</p>
Focus on strengths while paying attention to unique needs.	<p>Recognizing strengths allows for a focus on opportunities and solutions rather than just problems. However, do not discount the unique needs and challenges people currently face or have overcome!</p>	<p>Highlight people's unique strengths such as “resourceful”, “resilient”, “personable” – the list is endless.</p> <p>Instead of: describing a person or the person's situation as “disadvantaged, disenfranchised, downtrodden”.</p>
Be mindful of how language can rank and prioritize people.	<p>Avoid terms that rank people whenever possible. You will find this challenging! Our society is based on ranking and avoiding it altogether will be nearly impossible.</p> <p>Avoiding terms that rank people helps level the playing field by creating equity (fairness) in language.</p> <p>Ranking focuses on differences rather than similarities.</p> <p>Avoiding terms that rank people is based on the belief that all people have inherent value and therefore have something to contribute.</p>	<p>Use: We meet people “where they are at”</p> <p>Instead of: Identifying people at different “levels”</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “hit rock bottom or moving up in society” • “High end user of services” • Moving down to a person's level. • Upper and lower class • High and low risk neighbourhood

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<p>Avoid using aggressive language.</p>	<p>Aggressive language portrays a militaristic view of the world which implies that people are against or at war with each other.</p>	<p>Use: Direct support worker, shorter or longer term goal, direct support.</p> <p>Instead of: front line worker, target, in the trenches, on the radar, etc.</p>
<p>Avoid descriptions that refer to personal attributes unless they are relevant.</p>	<p>If a personal attribute is not relevant to the program or service we provide, then do not include this information in your description of the person.</p>	
<p>Use plain, clear and respectful language.</p>	<p>Acronyms and clichés should be avoided. Using plain, clear language complies with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act and makes our communication more accessible.</p>	