**WORDS MATTER**

Words matter. They shape perceptions and understanding, both of past and present events and of future possibilities and, therefore, future events. Semantic and public acceptance of terms like “formerly incarcerated” or “returning citizens” (rather than ex-felon, ex-offender, or ex-inmate) are of fundamental importance to the process of public opinion formulation, positive media images, effective social service delivery and, most importantly, progressive policy change. — Eddie Ellis

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**Language that is helpful in supporting health and well-being:**

- “People-first language” respects the worth and dignity of all persons;
  - Person living with HIV;
  - Person living with depression;
  - Person who is formerly incarcerated;
- Focuses on the medical nature of substance use and mental health disorders and treatment;
- Promotes the recovery process and shifts the emphasis from pathology and suffering to resilience and healing;
- Avoids perpetuating negative stereotype biases through the use of slang and idioms;
- Supports the client in choosing her comfortable level of self-disclosure;
- Helps in recognizing strengths;
- Is non-judgmental and phrases questions in ways that are more acceptable, and normalizing but less stigmatizing;
- Is sensitive to stigma and discrimination;
- Reflects an understanding of the realities of the lives of individuals and incorporates their strengths and challenges.

**Language that is less helpful in supporting health and well-being:**

- Defines people by the crime for which they were convicted (i.e., murderer, robber, drug dealer);
- Defines people by their perceived legal status (i.e., drug offender, drunk driver, felon);
- Uses potentially moralistic language regarding drug and substance use disorders (i.e., alcohol or drug abuse, addict).
### Words to Use When Discussing Criminal Justice Involvement

**Avoid:**
- Ex-offender; Thug; Criminal; Ex-inmate; Ex-felon; Ex-con
- Convict; Inmate; Offender; Felon
- Parolee; Probationer
- Illegal immigrant

**Say:**
- Justice-involved individual, person, man or woman; Formerly incarcerated individual or person; Returning citizen
- Person who is/was incarcerated
- Person on parole; Person on probation
- Residents without legal permission

### Words to Use When Discussing Substance Use and Mental Health

**Avoid:**
- Drug abuser; Addict; Junkie
- Alcohol abuse; Drug abuse; Substance abuse
- Noncompliant; Unmotivated; Resistant
- Schizophrenic; Depressive

**Say:**
- Injecting drug user; Person affected by drug use; Drug users; Active drug users; Person with an addiction
- Substance use disorder (SUD)
- Opted not to; Has not begun; Experiencing ambivalence and change
- Person who has been diagnosed with schizophrenia or depression

### Words to Use When Discussing HIV/AIDS

**Avoid:**
- AIDS when referring to HIV
- HIV virus
- AIDS or HIV patient; Suffering from HIV; AIDS victim
- To catch HIV or AIDS; To contract AIDS
- To pass on HIV

**Say:**
- HIV when referring to HIV; AIDS when referring to AIDS
- HIV; Human immunodeficiency virus; The virus that causes AIDS
- Person living with HIV
- To contract HIV; To become infected with HIV
- Transmit HIV

### Words to Use When Discussing Sexuality and Reproductive Health

**Avoid:**
- Sexually transmitted disease (STD)
- Risky sex
- Promiscuous
- Prostitute; Hooker; Street walker
- Rape victim
- High(er) risk group; Groups with high-risk behavior

**Say:**
- Sexually transmitted infection (STI)
- Unprotected sex
- Having multiple partners
- Sex worker; A person who is involved in transactional sex
- Sexual assault survivor
- High-risk behavior; Highly affected communities; Key populations at higher risk