

Language is critically important in shaping our perceptions. As such, we all have a distinct responsibility to be conscious, thoughtful, and deliberate about the language we use in order to ensure accurate and equitable outcomes. Furthermore, using person-first, asset-based, humanizing language that does not ‘other’ individuals or their experiences has a significant impact on peoples’ wellbeing and their ability to access and understand information and services. The Legal Action Center (LAC) encourages all stakeholders to operate from this framework of centering on individuals’ humanity and clearly articulating the systemic challenges they face when discussing our constituents and issue areas.

**When discussing issues that involve individuals impacted by mass incarceration, addiction, HIV, and associated systemic issues:**

| Instead of this...  | Try using this!   | Here’s why:   |
|---|---|---|
| <del>Criminal record</del>  | Arrest and/or conviction record   | Studies have shown that the ‘criminal’ label is damaging and can make it difficult to view an individual as a human first and foremost. Furthermore, specificity is important as a record of arrest and a record of conviction are distinctly different.  |
| <del>Felon; convict; offender; criminal; ex-con; ex-felon; parolee</del>              | Person impacted by/involved with the criminal legal system; person with an arrest or conviction record/history; person on parole/under parole supervision   | The labels we affix to those who have been entangled in the criminal legal system such as ‘felon’ and ‘convict’ can drain their sense of self-worth, diminish their humanity, and unfairly other them. These terms have negative connotations that reinforce false stereotypes and significantly limit an individual’s ability to overcome barriers. They portray individuals as a danger to society, defining them solely by a past act without considering their full person, current life, and future goals.   |
| <del>Inmate; prisoner; former inmate/prisoner</del>                                   | Incarcerated individual; person in jail/prison; formerly incarcerated individual  | A person’s incarcerated status does not wholly define them, and even in jail or prison, an individual is still, first and foremost, a person.   |
| <del>Substance abuse (disorder); addict; substance abuse/r; user; drug offender</del> | Substance use (disorder); individual with substance use disorder (SUD), or more specifically, for example, opioid use disorder (OUD); person who uses drugs | De-stigmatizing language around addiction should be a public health priority. Using the terminology ‘substance abuse’ or calling people who use drugs ‘substance abusers’ fuels the criminalization of a treatable health condition and perpetuates stigma. Research has proven that these terms elicit bias and negative attitudes in health care delivery and policy settings. ‘Substance abusers’ are viewed as less likely to benefit from treatment and are more likely to face punishment and be blamed for their illness. Amidst an escalating overdose crisis, we need to be doing all we can to foster treatment accessibility and save lives. Additionally, it is important to recognize that not everyone who uses drugs has a diagnosable substance use disorder. |

| Instead of this...  | Try using this!   | Here's why:  |
|---|---|--|
| <del>Medication-assisted treatment (MAT)</del>                      | MAT (medication for addiction treatment); addiction medication; treatment/medication for addiction or SUD; for OUD specifically – use MOUD (medication for opioid use disorder) | Medications for addiction treatment are first-line, standard of care, evidence-based treatments that have been proven to save lives and are often an integral part of a person's long-term treatment plan, rather than supplementary or temporary aids on the path to recovery.  |
| <del>Relapse</del>  | Recurrence  | The term 'relapse' puts the onus on the individual with the SUD while 'recurrence' puts the onus on the disease itself and offers a less stigmatizing alternative.   |
| <del>Clean</del>  | Individual in recovery; individual not using unprescribed drugs   | The term 'clean' reinforces the stigma that individuals who use drugs are 'dirty.'   |
| <del>Opioid epidemic</del>  | Overdose epidemic/crisis; opioid-related overdose epidemic/crisis   | The term 'opioid epidemic' extends stigma to individuals who rely on opioids for pain management, as an epidemic refers to widespread disease or an unfavorable outcome. Therefore, it is not the drug itself (opioid) that is an epidemic, it is the problems that can arise from their use. Further, the current overdose crisis is not limited to opioids.  |
| <del>Mentally ill</del>   | Person with a mental illness/mental health issue (specificity preferred)  | Calling someone 'mentally ill' does not adequately convey what a person may be diagnosed with or going through and can further stigmatize and reduce tolerance for their mental health issue.  |
| <del>HIV/AIDS patient; HIV/AIDS carrier; infected by HIV/AIDS</del> | Person living/diagnosed with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA)   | HIV and AIDS are not interchangeable, so it is important to avoid language that perpetuates inaccuracies. Further, individuals with HIV or AIDS can live long healthy lives, and identifying these individuals as 'patients' or 'carriers' only elicits unfounded paranoia.  |
| <del>Marijuana</del>  | Cannabis  | The legal and social associations with the term 'marijuana' in the US date back to the turn of the century when it was widely criminalized and used to fuel anti-Mexican sentiment. Meanwhile, the 'cannabis' industry has seen major developments in recent years, and many advocates view the term 'marijuana' as the language of white supremacy and a symbol of past and present oppression. They, as well as many lawmakers working towards legalization, prefer and encourage others to use the plant's scientific name, 'cannabis.' |

Questions about this language guide? Reach out to [communications@lac.org](mailto:communications@lac.org).

**LANGUAGE MATTERS. WORDS HAVE POWER. PEOPLE FIRST.**