CCALAC Ethical Storytelling Guide

As part of CCALAC's anti-racism organizational change initiative, the Combating Systemic Racism Communications Subcommittee developed a vocabulary list, using a JEDI lens, for CCALAC staff to use in all communications. Communication is an important part of building an anti-racist, social justice culture. Words matter and we want to be intentional in how we communicate about our work and the communities we serve.

A Progressive's Style Guide helps inform which language is included (and which language we should avoid) in this list as part of our work in community health. We encourage staff to review *A Progressive's Style Guide* for further guidance as it contains a wealth of information on ethical storytelling.

Tips to Keep in Mind: Central Principles from *A Progressive's Style Guide*

- People-first language
    - Personhood is the essential characteristic of every person. People-first language views other descriptive social identities that people may hold as secondary and non-essential.
    - *Only include identifiers that are absolutely necessary to the story.* If an identifier, such as race, ethnicity, age, disability, etc. is not relevant to the narrative, do not include it. For example, objective news outlets do not include race in their reporting unless it is relevant.
- Self-identification
    - Language should reflect peoples' choice and style in how they talk about themselves. If you aren't sure, ask. For example, when referring to age, one person may prefer "senior," while another person with the same age number may prefer "older adult."
- Active voice
    - Active voice puts the "actor" of the sentence in the role of performing the action. Name the actors of oppression, whether human, institutional, or cultural.
- Proper nouns
    - Names used for and by individual places, persons, and organizations convey respect, understanding, acceptance, and clarity. Avoid overusing words such as "it," "that," and "this", which can lead to confusion.
- Language that's potentially offensive
    - Just because one person doesn't find it offensive, does not mean certain terms are not offensive to others.
- Microaggressions
    - Recognize how microaggressions can occur in all forms of communication, including written form.

Examples of how to adapt language using the Central Principles:

Descriptors	People-first Language
Man White Formerly incarcerated HIV positive Senior Frequently noncompliant with medication Inconsistently engages with care	Larry is a 65-year-old man, White, experiencing homelessness and has been disengaged with his care team. He is inconsistent with his medication, living with HIV and is a person who is formerly justice-involved. *Consider: Does it matter that Larry is White? That he's a former justice-involved person? It depends on the story. Remember, if an identifier is not relevant to the narrative, do not include it.*
Nonbinary Low-income Struggles to afford healthy food Diabetic Millennial	Joey is experiencing food insecurity and receives CalFresh benefits. They are under the age of 45 and living with diabetes.
Patient Human trafficking victim Living with multiple chronic conditions	A patient living with multiple chronic conditions at San Fernando Community Health Center came into the clinic for their breast cancer and hypertension screenings. At the time of the appointment, the patient shared that they are a survivor of human trafficking.

Below you will see a list of words grouped by category. Each category contains recommended words to use and recommended words to avoid.

Age

Most times there is no need to refer to a person's age. When the need arises, list the specific age number, rather than assigning a category that may be vague and create negative connotations.

Do not use language that patronizes, sentimentalizes, distorts, or ignores people based on their age number, disability.

Ageing

Elderly person (if the subject self-identifies as elderly)

Older person (if the subject self-identifies as older)

People over . . .

People under . . .

Senior, senior population

Teen/teenager/preteen

Transitional age youth (TAY): young people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry) who are in transition from state custody or foster care environments and are at-risk

Young person

Youth

Avoid: middle-aged, old lady/man, senile, the aged, the elderly, the old

(Remember, the ethical default language is to be specific about a person's or a group's age or age range, instead of assigning a vague category like "the elderly".)

Disability

Consider how certain words tend to exclude individuals with disabilities (e.g., see or hear) not just in job descriptions, but in other contexts such as meetings, training and events. Here are some recommendations of ADA-compliant language that can serve as substitutes.

Physical Demand	ADA-Compliant Words
Stand or Sit	Stationary position
Walk, Run	Move, Traverse
Talk/hear	Communicate, Detect, Converse with, Discern, Convey, Express oneself, Discuss, Exchange information
See	Detect, Determine, Discern, Distinguish, Perceive, Identify, Recognize, Judge, Observe, Inspect, Estimate, Assess, Compare

People without disabilities

Person who has . . . (schizophrenia, etc.)

Person who is . . . (blind, etc.)

Person with . . . (muscular dystrophy, etc.)

Physical disability

PWDs (people with disabilities)

Avoid: able-bodied, addict, afflicted by, differently abled, handicapped, suffering from . . ., the disabled

Economy

If someone's social circumstances are relevant to the story, be specific: "Homeowners at risk of foreclosure."

Economic opportunity

Equity

Financial stability

[Giving families the tools and resources they need](link) (a resource can be one type of tool)

Expanding access to tools and resources

People experiencing material poverty

> *Material poverty: the lack of sufficient material means to meet basic needs. The lack of sufficient material means could include a lack of food, drinking water, shelter, clothing, or medicine. While one can experience material poverty, they can simultaneously experience wealth in other areas, such as family, friendship and spirituality.*

People experiencing homelessness

People with low incomes

Racial equity

Under-resourced

Avoid: at-risk, disadvantaged, in need, [the needy](link), the poor, [under-served](link)

(Remember to use "people first" language and be specific about what a person is experiencing; terms like "in need" are vague, do not center one's personhood and can have a negative stigma.)

Food

Use language that is accurate ("SNAP," not "food stamps"), but don't miss opportunities to also be descriptive ("safety net program") of reality. Use "people first" language and avoid phrases like someone being "on EBT".

[Food apartheid](link)

> *Food justice activist Karen Washington: What I would rather say instead of "food desert" is "food apartheid", because "food apartheid" looks at the whole food system, along with race, geography, faith, and economics. You say "food apartheid" and you get to the root cause of some of the problems around the food system. It brings in hunger and poverty. It brings us to the*

more important question: What are some of the social inequalities that you see, and what are you doing to erase some of the injustices?

Food security

Food insecurity

Hunger

Safety net program

Avoid: food desert, food stamps, the hungry

> *Note on food desert: the phrase 'food desert' implies lack, not abundance, but if you talk to an indigenous person from the desert, desert implies sustaining life force; it implies all of these food systems and life ways that are different than the mainstream conception of what a food desert is. Deserts have provided sustenance to indigenous people since the beginning of time.*

Gender/Sex

Generally, it is not necessary to specify the gender of a person in a particular role, as most occupations are not gender defined. Avoid terms that show gender biases in the profession: cleaner, police officer, chair, not cleaning lady, policeman, chairman. Adding "male" before "nurse" or "lady" before "doctor" is almost always unnecessary. Likewise, avoid gendering body functions and objects. For example:

- Menstrual products instead of feminine hygiene products

- People who menstruate instead of assuming only and all women menstruate (some intersex, nonbinary and transgender people menstruate, while many cisgender women do not)

Use "pronouns" and avoid "preferred pronouns". *They* is a good alternative if you aren't sure of the person's pronoun. Please note, the gender pronouns included below are not an exhaustive list and if someone identifies with a pronoun not listed, refer to them as such.

Avoid defaulting to umbrella terms like gay or homosexual. Use LGBTQIA+ to refer to a broad community or be specific when relevant: lesbian, gay man, bisexual woman, etc.

Use "men" and "women" instead of "male" and "female". People often use gender and sex interchangeably, but this is incorrect. *Female* is a scientific term that refers to the sex of a species capable of producing offspring and many women would not be considered female by that definition. Likewise, transgender people with a uterus who don't identify as women can get pregnant.

Assigned [male, female, intersex] at birth – use as necessary, may be used in the context of describing transgender care

Bisexual

Cisgender, cisgender man/woman/people

Gay

[Intersex](#)

Lesbian

LGBTQIA+

Men

Non-binary

Sexual orientation

Transgender, transgender man/woman/people

Women

Avoid: [transgendered](#), tranny

Health

Clinics might use different terminology for patient diagnoses. Recognize the difference between referring to people (e.g. a person with substance use disorder) and referring to data markers (use your discretion).

Mandated reporter

Nicotine cessation (many indigenous cultures use tobacco for traditional purposes and not the commercial tobacco associated with nicotine addiction)

People diagnosed with...

People living with... (AIDS, diabetes, HIV, etc.)

Substance use, substance use disorder

Avoid: alcoholic, AIDS victim, full-blown AIDS, suffering from AIDS, people with AIDS, [tobacco cessation](#)

Immigration/Refugees

Children of immigrants

DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipient

Person seeking citizenship

Refugee

Second-generation

Undocumented immigrant

Avoid: DREAMer, illegal immigrant, legal alien/citizen/resident

> *Note on DREAMer: identifying as a DREAMer was originally a political and strategic decision to push for DREAM Act legislation. However, DREAMer excludes millions of people who don't qualify for DACA and can create a narrative of Good (high-achieving undocumented youth) vs. Bad (everyone else) immigrant. There are also other connotations to it that many DACA recipients have come to reject.*

Race and Ethnicity

Alaska Native/Native Alaskan

[American Indian/Native American](#) (The consensus, however, is that whenever possible, Native people prefer to be called by their specific tribal name)

Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI)

Bias/implicit bias

[BIPOC: Black, Indigenous, and People of Color](#)

[Black and African-American](#) (These terms are frequently treated as interchangeable, even though they are not)

Indigenous

Latinx/a/e/o

> [Hispanic](#) *is used on the U.S. Census and other forms that collect information on ethnicity. Keep in mind, the term Hispanic is also inclusive of Spanish-speaking Europeans and usually not inclusive of non-Spanish speaking Latin Americans, potentially resulting in Indigenous and African erasure.*

> *While Hispanic is still the most widely used identifier by U.S. people of Latin American origin, the term Latinx is generally considered more inclusive of all gender identities. [Some prefer the term Latine instead of Latinx](#).*

> *It is recommended that we refer to Latinx/a/e/o as an ethnicity and not a racial category because [it relates to people from a region (Latin America) that are of many different races, cultures, etc.](#)*

Reminder, ask your subject(s) how they identify when using a term.

Native Hawaiian

Person, people of color (with consideration; BIPOC is usually appropriate. If referring to one specific person or group, use that person's or group's name, e.g. Black people)

Racism – be specific about the action/behavior/policy and identify white supremacy when applicable; recognize that people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds can engage in racism.

White

Avoid: [Caucasian](), linguistic minority, [minority,]() spirit animal

Rape & Domestic Violence

Consent

Mandated reporter

Person experiencing domestic violence

Survivor

Victim of domestic violence

Avoid: accuser, alleged victim, victim (unless used to self-identify)