INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE GUIDE

PREPARED BY:

ASC
AMERICA'S SERVICE COMMISSIONS
Language is a Powerful Tool

America’s Service Commissions (ASC) is committed to creating an equitable and inclusive environment through learning, advocacy, and training in its internal work and with the network of state service commissions, their programs, and other stakeholders in order for national service and volunteering to grow and thrive in a manner that is reflective of the communities in which it serves.

This inclusive language guide was prepared by The SISGI Group to assist ASC and the national service network in moving forward on the path to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI). Additional input for this guide has been provided by members and colleagues that serve on the ASC JEDI Work Group. We thank all the members for their input and service in this crucial work for our network's growth and evolution.

The inclusive language guidelines addressed in this guide are associated with age, nationality, socioeconomic status, ability, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation.

Please use this guide as a reference for communicating with words and expressions that are free from bias, stereotypes, and discrimination.
INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

is visual or verbal communication that does not stereotype or demean people based on personal characteristics, including age, nationality, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ability, religion, gender, gender expression, and sexual orientation.
Avoid the Generalization of Age Groups

The language used in your organization should be welcoming to people of all ages. Do not use ageist terms like "elderly" and "youngster"; instead use older adults, young people, teenagers, children, etc. Avoid making any form of assumption or generalization of generations that reinforces stereotypes. Do not call young people "kid" or "novice," and do not refer to older adults as "mature" or "experienced" as this draws correlations to age and abilities.

Don't Try to Identify Someone's Nationality

Nationality can not be determined by physical appearance or a spoken language. Never make assumptions of people's country of birth or make stereotypical statements about their appearance and spoken language such as "Are you from Mexico?" or "You seem to have an accent. Where are you from?" Some people prefer not to be identified by their nationality, and that should be respected. Be careful with using the term American when only referring to the U.S. as American relates to everyone in North America.

Never use "illegal," "illegal alien," or "immigrant" to refer to individuals who are not U.S. citizens. These words dehumanize the individual by stripping down their identity to a legal status. The appropriate and preferred word is undocumented.
Avoid Labels and Euphemisms

Situations can change over time, and calling people by their socioeconomic statuses or abilities can forever define individuals and contribute to community biases. For example, calling someone an "addict" can be stigmatizing, and terms like "differently-abled," "challenged," and "special needs" are patronizing.

Do not use words that stereotype. When describing people without disabilities, don't use terms like "normal," "healthy," or "able-bodied," as this creates the idea of a superior group. Try saying "people without visible disabilities" because we cannot tell if someone has a disability by physical appearance.

Never mention someone's socioeconomic or ability status unless it is essential for information. When it is relevant to bring up someone's background or ability, always use people-first language. Refer to the person first, not to their socioeconomic situation or ability status. Instead of "drug addict," say "a person with a history of substance abuse," instead of "handicap," say "a person with a disability," and instead of saying "homeless youth," try saying "youth experiencing homelessness."

When in doubt, ask individuals about accepted terms. Saying "handicapped parking" is acceptable, but it is preferred to say "accessible parking" and the deaf community prefers "deaf person" or "hard of hearing" as opposed to "hearing impaired," which implies a deficit.
"Underserved" is a blanket term that is often used to describe environments. While the term is well-intended, it stigmatizes communities. The term underserved makes communities appear as if their challenges are all related to services and fails to depict the systemic inequities faced by groups.

"Inner-city" and "poverty" are alternative terms used interchangeably with underserved to describe environments, but both terms have negative connotations towards individuals’ education and economic situations.

"At-risk" is another problematic adjective that is widely used in the field of education to describe students that may not perform well in traditional educational settings due to socioeconomic and psychological factors. Unfortunately, referring to students as at-risk puts an unwanted label and creates a stigma that can lead to stereotypes. "Risk" should only be used to describe a condition or situation, not a person. Skip "at-risk" alternatives like "at-promise," "historically underserved," and "disenfranchised" that can be seen as condescending euphemisms.

The most inclusive way to refer to students is simply as students. You can, however, use at-risk in a sentence to describe risk factors students face.
Minority is a term that was used to classify people of color, who now make up the majority of the world population. The term minority is no longer demographically accurate and negatively connotes people of color by making them appear of lesser status. Marginalized, oppressed, and the acronyms BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) and HUGS (Historically Underrepresented Groups) are more accurate and inclusive terms to use, but it is ideal to refer to racial and ethnic groups specifically. When race or ethnicity is relevant to the community, be as specific as possible in describing the group of people (Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Lakota, Navajo, etc.).

Lowercase black refers to the color, not a person. Always capitalize Black to convey an essential and shared sense of history, identity, and community among people who identify as Black, including people in the African diaspora and within Africa.

Be aware that although we use African American and Black interchangeably, Black people of Caribbean, Central American, or South American origin may not identify as African American.

It is essential to specifically use the word Black if you are discussing an issue that impacts Black people to avoid summarizing it with all people of color as each race and ethnicity share unique experiences.
**Latino & Hispanic**

**Latino** and **Latina** refer to people with origins from Latin America, which is any place in the Americas that speaks a language descending from a Latin romance language, including the Caribbean and Brazil.

**Hispanic** is a person who has lineage to a Spanish-speaking country. It includes Spain but excludes Brazil, where Portuguese is spoken.

**Latinx** (pronounced lah-TEEN-ex) is a gender-neutral alternative to the gendered terms Latino and Latina.

**Latine** was created by Spanish-speaking countries to replace Latinx, which is difficult to pronounce in Spanish. Latine replaces the letter x with the letter e that is found in gender-neutral Spanish words like "estudiante."

**Asian & Pacific Islander**

AAPI is an inclusive term used in the U.S. to include both Asian Americans (AA) and Pacific Islanders (PI). AAPI refers to people with origins in any of the original peoples of Western, Eastern, and Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, or the Pacific Islands, and all people in the U.S. who self-identify as Asian or Pacific Islander.

Other variations of the term include Asian Pacific American (APA), Asian Pacific Islander (API), and Asian Pacific Islander American (APIA).

Referring to someone as Middle Eastern is not accurate. The term Middle East is imperialist and originated with the British Foreign Office in the 19th century. Western Asia is a more neutral and accurate term for the region.
**Indigenous Peoples**

Native American or Alaska Native is acceptable for Indigenous Peoples in the U.S. However, to truly be inclusive, you should do the research to learn the tribes located in your state and understand the tribal organization so you can refer to individuals correctly. For example, "He is a Navajo commissioner." Recognize that you have settler privilege and that communication can continue oppression and colonization. Learn and understand the Indigenous communities in your state and community.

**Land Acknowledgment**

A land acknowledgment is a statement that is said at the beginning of events, ceremonies, and lectures to honor and express gratitude and appreciation to the Indigenous peoples whose territory you reside on. Native Americans are the original caretakers of the land. It is important to understand the history that brought you to land that was forcefully taken from Indigenous peoples through genocide by colonizers. Land acknowledgments do not exist in the past tense or historical context; colonialism is ongoing, and we need to recognize our present participation.

There is no set template or one way to write a land acknowledgment. Start by visiting native-land.ca to research tribes that reside in your area and write a statement that pays respects to the land and tribe. Never ask your local tribes or Indigenous networks to say or write land acknowledgments for you, as it is disrespectful to ask someone whose land was invaded to welcome people.

**Honor Preferences of Each Person or Group**

Always capitalize racial and ethnic identifiers, but do not hyphenate dual heritage terms such as Mexican American, Asian American, etc. White people do not share the same history, culture, or experience of being discriminated against because of skin color. For that reason, don’t capitalize the words white or people of color (except when used as part of the BIPOC acronym).
Don't Make Assumptions

You can not tell a person's religion based on their nationality or the way they dress. For example, not all Arabs are Muslims, and different cultures and religions utilize similar attire. All nationalities and ethnicities have different religious practices and beliefs. Never ask people about their religion unless they share this information with you on their own.

Don't Reference Religious Practices or Beliefs

Religions and beliefs should never be referenced unless they are relevant to the context, such as in an anti-discrimination policy or statement, or if you work in a religious organization.

Recognize Diversity

Do not make statements that generalize groups and do not recognize different practices and beliefs. Instead of saying "God bless you," say "bless you," and instead of saying "Merry Christmas," say "Happy Holidays" or "Season's Greetings."

If you work in a religious organization, pay attention to gender references, like referring to God as "Him" or "Father." Recognize that God is beyond gender distinctions. Male-centered language in religion can be dangerous and reinforce the belief in male superiority and dominance in society.
Always Use Gender-Neutral Terms

Appearance does not indicate gender identity or sexual orientation. For example, just because someone is feminine-presenting does not mean they identify as a woman. Using gender-neutral language eliminates assumptions about an individual's gender identity and sexual orientation.

Only mention gender or sex when it is necessary to do so, and use the singular they/them/their in your everyday language to be more inclusive unless you know people's pronouns. For example, instead of saying "he" or "she" in a sentence, say "they." Replace gendered terms such as chairman to chair or mankind to humankind. Avoid saying "guys" when talking to a group; try saying "everyone," "folx," or "people." Instead of using "ladies and gentlemen" or "boys and girls," try saying "folx" or "kids." Using gender-neutral terms is also important when referring to someone's family. Use caregiver instead of mother/father as not everyone has parents. Replace sister/brother with sibling and husband/wife with partner to avoid making assumptions.

Learn Queer and Nonbinary Terms

When referring to queer and nonbinary individuals, always use LGBTQIA or LGBTQ+ instead of LGBT, which excludes community members. The Gender Unicorn provides the differences between gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and physical and emotional attraction.
Respect Peoples Pronouns and Identity

- Pronouns are not preferred because they are not optional. Always ask individuals for their pronouns when you are not sure how to address them.

- Pronouns do not indicate gender identity. If someone uses they/them pronouns, it does not automatically mean they are non-binary.

- Some people use different pronouns depending on situations like safety or social setting. For example, someone might be non-binary and use they/them pronouns in most settings, but they might ask friends and family to use he/him pronouns in large public gatherings.

  Don't misgender someone, but if you do, correct yourself and move on. Don't apologize as doing so puts the responsibility on the misgendered person; simply say something like "I meant (insert pronoun)" while making a mental note to not make this mistake in the future.

Normalize Pronouns Usage

- Introduce yourself with your pronouns.

- Add pronouns in name tags, including in virtual platforms.

- Add pronouns in email signatures and presentation slides.

- Add pronouns next to staff names or bios on your organization's website.

- Write a person's pronoun when you are writing blogs or articles on them.

- Include a person's pronouns on social media posts and materials.

- Always correct people if they have misgendered someone else.
Apply Inclusive Language To All Settings

When you are hosting in-person gatherings and events, are you selecting locations that are accessible for everyone? Do you have available interpreters in the languages spoken in the community? Are you using name tags with pronouns? Did you write a land acknowledgment for the event?

- Work with your local Disability Association for resources. They can provide information on which venues are most accessible, provide you with interpreters for events, review materials for a variety of disabilities, and provide current technology and resources for accommodations.

Are your website, blogs, and social media posts accessible for people who are blind or deaf? Are materials available to be translated into different languages?

- Check your website's accessibility scores on the WAVE (wave.webaim.org) and Lighthouse (developers.google.com/web/tools/lighthouse) website evaluation tools.

If you are hosting virtual webinars and events, are you using online platforms that offer closed captioning and providing translators?

- The World Wide Web Consortium (w3.org) maintains an extensive list of web accessibility evaluation tools.
Be Thoughtful and Intentional

Good intentions don't mean you won't make mistakes. Inclusive language is constantly evolving. If you make a mistake, simply correct yourself, but never choose to stay silent.

Everyone is looking at the stance of organizations and what they believe. If you are making materials for your state commission or AmeriCorps program, create a package and brand guidelines related to JEDI (justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion).

Below are things to include in the standard package:

- The population served with their preferred terms for race and ethnicity
- An organization or program values statement related to JEDI
- Templates with a bank of images approved by the individuals or communities in the photos to be shared to the public
- Standby statements in the event of mistakes

Inclusion brand guidelines should apply to all modes of communication, including websites, videos, newsletters, social media posts, reports, press releases, promotional materials, advertisements, photography, presentations, opinion pieces, legislative testimony, meetings, and speeches.

Communication materials should include people of all ethnicities, gender identities, religious affiliations, abilities, and ages in a way that makes no assumptions.
## Remember that You Represent Your Community

- Avoid othering and tokenism
- Use census data to inform
- Amplify voices and representation
- View yourself and the organization as a partner instead of a savior

### Avoid saying

- Elderly
- Illegal, Illegal alien, Immigrant
- Addict
- Homeless Youth
- Disabled, Handicapped
- Able-body
- Hearing-impaired
- Underserved, Inner-City
- At-Risk Student
- Minorities
- Indian
- God bless you
- Merry Christmas
- Mankind
- Chairman/Chairwomen

### Try saying

- Older adult or Older People
- Undocumented
- Person with substance abuse history
- Youth experiencing homelessness
- Person with a disability
- People without disabilities
- Deaf person or Hard of hearing
- Underresourced
- Student
- Marginalized or Oppressed Groups
- Indigenous Peoples, Native American
- Bless you
- Happy Holidays or Season's Greetings
- Humankind
- Chair

- They, That person/student, The guest
- Everyone, folx, kids, students
- Caregiver, Partner, Sibling

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**Note:**
- **Avoid othering and tokenism**
- **Use census data to inform**
- **Amplify voices and representation**
- **View yourself and the organization as a partner instead of a savior**

**Tips:**
- Use inclusive language in your communication.
- Always consider the context and audience when choosing words.
- Be mindful of cultural and social differences.

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Inclusive Language Checklist

- Have I checked for bias?
- Does it reflect the community and population?
- Am I speaking for someone or amplifying their voice?
- Does this follow our values?
- Have I run this by the inclusion team?

Inclusive language is about making a paradigm shift to Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion.

Develop a JEDI Cultural Mindset

- Lead with inclusion and anti-racism.
- Train all staff members and volunteers.
- Create an inclusion committee with local stakeholders to advance equity.
- Let your mission and values guide your view towards justice.
Inclusive language is a necessary first step, but true inclusion requires long term strategies and investment.

Language is constantly evolving in response to cultural changes. Take action and advocate for policies that will advance equity across race, gender, disability, age, class, and geography. Hold yourselves accountable to learn and operate as an organization that strives to be actively anti-racist and inclusive. Implement strategies that amplify the voices and experiences of the communities you serve, and invest in long-term training on justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.