

Language Guidelines for Inclusive Emergency Preparedness, Response, Mitigation, and Recovery

The table below offers language guidelines for referring to people with disabilities. This table is based on several key principles:

- Use people-first language; place the emphasis on the individual instead of the disability.
- Use terms consistent with the integration mandate in the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- Use language that is respectful and straightforward.
- Refer to a person’s disability only if it is relevant.
- Avoid terms that lead to exclusion (e.g., “special” is associated with “separate” and “segregated” services).
- Avoid terms that are judgmental, negative, or sensational (e.g., special, brave, courageous, dumb, super-human).
- Avoid making assumptions or generalizations about the level of functioning of an individual based on their diagnosis or disability. Individuals are unique and have diverse abilities and characteristics.
- Language influences behavior. Inclusive language is a powerful ingredient for achieving successful outcomes.

USE	DON'T USE
People with disabilities	The handicapped, the disabled, the impaired
An individual or person with a disability	Disabled person
Access and functional needs	Special needs, vulnerable
Deaf, hard of hearing, sensory disability	Deaf and dumb, the deaf, mute
Accessible communication, effective communication	Special communication
He has a speech disability	He has a speech impairment, speech impediment
He is blind, he has low vision	The blind, visual impairment, visually impaired, sight impaired
She has a mobility disability	She’s mobility impaired, physically challenged, crippled, an invalid, lame, differently-abled, bedridden, house-bound, a shut-in
She has (multiple sclerosis, cancer, etc.)	Suffers from, afflicted with, stricken with, impaired by

USE	DON'T USE
He uses a wheelchair, he uses a scooter, he uses a mobility device	Wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair person
Assistive devices, assistive technology, durable medical equipment	Handicapped equipment, special devices
Power chair, motorized wheelchair	Electric wheelchair
She sustained a spinal cord injury, she has paralysis, she has a spinal cord injury, has paraplegia, quadriplegia	She's paralyzed, she's a cripple, she's trapped in her body, her body is lifeless, crippled, useless
Prosthesis, prosthetic limb	Fake leg, wooden leg, peg leg
He has cerebral palsy	He's spastic, palsied
He has epilepsy, he has seizures	He has spells, fits
She is a little person, she has dwarfism, he is of short stature	She's a dwarf, she's a midget
She has Down syndrome	She's Downs, a Down's kid, mongoloid, retarded
He has a learning disability	He is learning disabled, slow, slow learner, dumb
A person with an intellectual disability	The mentally retarded, retard, mental retardation, mentally impaired
A woman with a cognitive disability, a person with dementia or Alzheimer's Disease	Senile, demented
A child with a traumatic brain injury or a head injury	Brain damaged, slow
He has autism, he is autistic (this term is preferred by some people with autism)	Mental, mentally impaired, retarded, dumb
She has a mental illness, an emotional disability, psychiatric disability, she has a diagnosis of schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, uses behavioral health services	Emotionally disturbed, disturbed, crazy, psycho, schizo, insane, manic, manic depression, mental, mental patient He's a behavior problem, he needs behavior management, she's a problem child, he is crazy, they are out of control
Congenital disability, sustained a birth injury	Birth defect, defective
Children who receive special education services, children with Individual Education Plans	Special education kid, special needs child, rides the short bus, SPED, he's special ed, he is special

USE	DON'T USE
A person who doesn't have a disability	Normal person, whole person, intact, able-bodied
Senior citizen, senior, elder, older person	The elderly
Senior or elder with a disability	The frail elderly
Accessible bathroom, accessible parking, accessible housing, accessible transportation	Handicapped bathrooms, handicapped parking, special needs housing, special housing, special transportation
Medical needs, health care needs	Special Medical Needs
She requires support or assistance with...	She has a problem with ...
Universal cot, accessible cot	ADA cot, special needs cot, special medical cot
Personal assistance services, personal care assistance	Caregiver (for an adult)
Functional needs support services in a general population shelter, accessible shelter, universal shelter	Special needs shelter, special shelter, special functional needs shelter
Person who receives disability services	Client, patient, burden, welfare case
People, members of the community	Vulnerable people, at-risk people, burdens
Disaster survivor	Disaster victim
John has been promoted to CEO. He is known for his skills as a problem-solver.	John has been promoted to CEO despite his limitations. We are all inspired by his bravery
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Adapted from PADHS Inclusive Language Guidelines (2018)