



King County

Office of Civil Rights

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DISABILITY LANGUAGE AND ETIQUETTE

LANGUAGE

Language is continually evolving, including language related to people with disabilities. Staying current is important, not to show “politically correctness” but to communicate effectively and with respect. What you say and write may enhance the dignity of people with disabilities or may inadvertently reflect stereotypes and negative attitudes.

Some words and phrases don’t recognize the broad range of capabilities of people with disabilities. They don’t need or want to be pitied, nor should they be labeled “courageous” or “special” because they accomplish daily activities or work. Also, people are sometimes concerned that they will say the wrong thing, so they say nothing at all – further segregating people with disabilities.

“Handicap” and “disability” are not synonyms! Disability is a generic term for a condition which may affect a person’s mobility, hearing, vision, speech, or cognitive function (such as paraplegia, deafness, AIDS). Handicap describes an environmental or attitudinal barrier (such as no ramp or elevator, information not available in Braille, negative stereotypes).

“Person First” Refer to the person first, not the disability. For example, “the person who uses a wheelchair” or “the person with arthritis” is preferred over “the wheelchair person” or “the arthritic”, which define the person as a disability rather than as one aspect of his/her life. This general rule may be different within some communities -- some individuals self-identify their group as “the blind” or “the Deaf.” Mention a disability only when it is relevant to the discussion.

ETIQUETTE

If you have had little interaction with people who have disabilities, you may feel uncertain about what to do. Here are a few tips.

- **Shaking hands** is usually welcome. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb can usually shake hands. Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting. You may want to take the cue from the person with a disability. (Someone who is blind may not see your extended hand – wait to see if she extends hers.)
- **When talking with a person who has a disability**, look at and speak directly to that person rather than to a companion, aide, or sign language interpreter.
- **Common words and phrases** are okay to use. For example, it’s fine to say “see you later” to a blind person, or “Want to go for a walk?” to a wheelchair user.

Want more info? Contact the OCR Disability Compliance Specialist at 206-263-2453.

**WHEN REFERRING TO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES,
CHOOSE WORDS THAT REFLECT DIGNITY AND RESPECT, SUCH AS:**

INAPPROPRIATE LANGUAGE	APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE
impairment, physically challenged, differently abled, handicapable, impaired, crippled, suffers from, afflicted with, stricken with, victim of, diseased, invalid, abnormal, defective	has a disability, is a person with a disability, person who is physically disabled, person who walks with a cane, person who has a respiratory condition, is a person with AIDS, person who has epilepsy, etc.
the disabled	people with disabilities, the disability community <i>(disabled, an adjective, must be accompanied by a noun)</i>
normal person, healthy, whole	non-disabled, person without disabilities, able-bodied
handicap parking, disabled parking	accessible parking, disability parking
wheelchair bound, confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair person	wheelchair user, person who uses a wheelchair (or scooter)
electric chair	wheelchair, power chair
paraplegic, quadriplegic, cripp, gimp, lame	man with paraplegia, woman who is paralyzed, person with spinal cord injury, has a mobility disability, walks with difficulty
hearing impaired, hearing impairment	deaf, hard of hearing, late-deafened
visually impaired, visual impairment	low vision, partially sighted, blind
the blind, the deaf	the blind community, the Deaf community
dumb, mute	person who does not speak, has difficulty speaking, uses synthetic speech, is non-vocal, is non-verbal
stutterer, tongue-tied	person with a speech or communication disability
CP victim, spastic, spaz	person with cerebral palsy
epileptic	person with epilepsy, person with seizure disorder
fit, attack, spell	seizure, epileptic episode or event
dwarf, midget	person of small stature / short stature; little person
birth defect	congenital disability, disabled since birth
post-polio person, suffered from polio	person who had polio, person with post polio syndrome, polio survivor
(person) mentally ill, mentally disturbed, crazy, insane, nuts, psycho, schizo	person with mental health issue / condition
(situation) crazy, insane, nuts, mad	wild, hectic, extreme
retard, mentally defective, moron, idiot, dimwit, imbecile, Down's person, mongoloid, feeble minded	person with an intellectual / cognitive / developmental disability
slow learner, retarded, ADHD person	has a learning disability, person with a learning disability, person with ADHD