



Communicating With an Equity Lens

When developing messages, it is important to analyze the communication with an equity lens to ensure the use of inclusive language. Words are powerful and can unconsciously assume things about an audience, unintentionally reinforce normalized stereotypes, or cause harm or trauma to a specific audience. Inclusive communications demonstrate listening and care, thus building trust with Commonwealth employees and residents.

Tips

The purpose of an equity lens is to be deliberately inclusive in decision making and behavior. The following are principles that can be used to develop an equity lens with the goal of creating inclusive communications that help individuals understand and be understood.

- **Check implicit bias.** To provide quality communications that serve the public interest, it is important to recognize and accept that every individual has attitudes and beliefs outside of their conscious control. This is called implicit bias and must be intentionally interrupted. Read every communication with deep self-awareness of personal blind spots to be deliberately inclusive. Consider consulting with a DEI committee member or DEI professional for particularly sensitive topics.
- **Use human-centered language.** Using human-centered language places the emphasis on humanity, not a label or a status. (e.g., a person with a disability, a person in recovery)
- **Use language that accurately reflects how an individual self-identifies.** Be aware that language around self-identity is fluid; therefore, it is critical to continue learning and observing. In addition, individuals have multiple intersecting identities. Use the language with which the individual self-identifies but only use this information when it is pertinent to the content of the message. (e.g., pronouns, BIPOC). If unknown, ask respectfully and explain the purpose for the question. Use gender neutral language when gender is unknown and recognize that “they” can be used for singular and is grammatically correct, according to APA.
- **Use plain language.** For many reasons, it is important to ensure that both writing style and word choice are understandable for the widest possible audience. The [Hemingway App](#) is a helpful tool for checking the readability of a communication and can also help identify and simplify complex sentences.
- **Be careful about using idiomatic expressions.** Idioms often do not translate favorably for English language learners. Additionally, some expressions have traumatic historical context or use offensive terminology (e.g., turning a blind eye, black sheep, stood up a program).
- **Be thoughtful about the imagery used.** Words like “stood up” or “blind” symbolize negative concepts. These associations can be offensive and should be avoided.



- **Prioritize the needs of the affected community.** Communicators must ask who is positively and negatively impacted by a specific issue and place the needs of the affected community at the center. Be thoughtful about asking how the message intentionally includes or excludes communities who are affected.
- **Be Trauma-Informed.** Consider who might be harmed by a specific message to avoid re-traumatizing the community based on past experiences. While it is never a professional communicator’s *intent* to harm in messaging, it is the *impact* that matters.
- **Visual representation matters.** Ensure that any images or graphics are fair, responsible, and accurate. Photos should be representative of a variety of visual identities. Communicators have a responsibility to show reality in the depiction of marginalized identities and issues. Remain mindful that societal issues impact people of varying identities. (e.g., always using photos of BIPOC families with messaging surrounding housing/homelessness assistance)

Frequent Usages

The following are frequent terms used in Pennsylvania Government accounts. This language changes frequently to become more inclusive and strengths-based over time, which makes it important to verify the use of current terminology.

Better Inclusive Terms to Use	Less Inclusive Terms to Avoid
Substance use Substance use disorder	Addiction
Pennsylvanians/people in recovery, Pennsylvanians/people recovering from x	Addict, alcoholic
Pennsylvanians with ability concerns People with ability concerns Pennsylvanians who are blind, deaf, have low vision Note: Blind and deaf are self-identifiers. Use “person of low or limited vision/hearing, partially sighted/hearing”	Disabled Pennsylvanians/people, blind Pennsylvanians/people, deaf Pennsylvanians/people Able-bodied; normal
Pennsylvanian/person with bipolar disorder/mental illness, <i>person</i> has x or <i>person lives with</i>	Mentally ill person, bipolar person, <i>Person</i> suffers from x
Reckless, irresponsible, unpredictable, frustrating	Crazy, insane, and other hyperbolic words that reinforce stereotypes about mental health
People/Pennsylvanians who are/were incarcerated	Prisoner, convict, inmate, criminal, offender



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Reentry; Reentrant	Formerly incarcerated person, formerly imprisoned person, ex-convict
A woman who served in our armed forces, woman veteran	Female veteran
Seniors, older Pennsylvanians	The elderly, geriatric (unless referring to medical area of study)
LGBTQIA	LGBT Queer, Gay (unless these terms are used to self-identify)
Transgender, Non-binary	Transgendered, Transsexual
BIPOC - Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color	People of Color
Indigenous People, Native	American Indian, Native American
Pennsylvanians experiencing poverty	Poor people, impoverished Pennsylvanians
Acceptance	Tolerance
Pennsylvania residents	Pennsylvania citizens

Sources:

[Tools for Communicating About Diversity, Equity and Inclusion | University Relations \(umn.edu\)
https://www.diversitystyleguide.com](https://www.diversitystyleguide.com)

[UMAC-Equitable-Language-Guide-v.2.pdf](#)

[Conscious Language + Design - Conscious Style Guide](#)

For additional assistance or consultation, please contact DEIoffice@pa.gov.
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