

POSITION STATEMENT

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NATIONAL COMMISSION
ON CORRECTIONAL HEALTH CARE

Use of Humanizing Language in Correctional Health Care

Introduction

The National Commission on Correctional Health Care is the nation's long-standing leader in the development of standards and accreditation of health care for correctional facilities. NCCHC's mission is to improve the quality of health care in jails, prisons, and juvenile confinement facilities.

Correctional health professionals need to create a therapeutic relationship with their patients, beginning with treating each person with humanity and humility. Labels that do not center someone's personhood can be stigmatizing and can be internalized by people in negative ways; people have many dimensions to their lives and should not be defined according to a medical or mental condition they have or whether they are in custody. Language used to describe individuals who experience incarceration should identify them as people first, rather than through a term that categorizes them solely according to their incarceration status or to a behavioral or medical condition.

Position Statement

NCCHC supports the use of humanizing and respectful language to describe people who experience incarceration. NCCHC recommends that people who work in correctional facilities and those who interact with or who convey information about people experiencing incarceration (e.g., researchers, policy makers, journalists) use person-centered language in written and oral communication.

1. Reframe historically stigmatizing language by using person-first language such as person/people/individuals experiencing incarceration, incarcerated person/people/individuals, the incarcerated, person living with HIV, person with substance use disorder.
2. Avoid correctional labels such as inmate, offender, prisoner, felon, convict, criminal.
3. For the youth population, avoid terms such as juvenile, juvenile offender, and minor. Preferred terms are youth, adolescent, child, and young adult, as appropriate.
4. Avoid health-defining labels such as addict, drug user, HIV patient, psychotic, diabetic.

February 3, 2021 – adopted by the National Commission on Correctional Health Care Board of Directors

Resources

People first: Changing the way we talk about those touched by the criminal justice system. Urban Wire: Crime and Justice blog of the Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/people-first-changing-way-we-talk-about-those-touched-criminal-justice-system>

We are people. Resources for humanizing language. The Osborne Association. <http://www.osborneny.org/resources/resources-for-humanizing-language>

Words matter. The Fortune Society. <https://fortunesociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Words-Matter-Humanizing-Language.pdf>

Words matter: A call for humanizing and respectful language to describe people who experience incarceration. *BMC International Health and Human Rights*. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12914-018-0180-4>