

Redwood Region RISE

Inclusive Language for Centering Equity

Related: [RRRISE Theory of Change](#)

In the words of Desmond Tutu, “Language is very powerful. Language does not just describe reality. Language creates the reality it describes.” With this in mind, we strive to use language that is respectful, asset-based, people first, and non- stigmatizing. We strive to be intentional in our use of language, recognizing the power it holds and the reality it creates.

When available, we will use the language that individuals use to self-identify, particularly when referencing the qualitative data from community input. We also acknowledge that these identifiers may change depending on the context and setting. For example, someone may identify as a Person of Color in one setting and Latina in another. We recognize there may be times when an individual may use a self-identifier that would be inappropriate for someone else to use. Additionally, whenever possible, we will be specific in naming populations, i.e. Black, Latino/a, etc., instead of using broad, generalized terms. (*Source: Providence Inclusive and Respectful Language for Centering Equity, 2021*)

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1. Economic Development Related Terms

Instead of...	Consider using...
Disinvested/Disadvantaged Communities	Communities who face a confluence of relatively severe and often interconnected hardships including, but not limited to, poverty, disability, lack of access to household or community resources, or lack of economic or educational opportunities. Read our Memo: Rethinking "Disinvested Communities"
Stakeholder (<i>Historically, the term stakeholder has connotations and has been used by people in power or the "holders."</i>)	Interest holder, collaborator, colleague, partner, shareholder, associate, and contributor
Shovel-ready (<i>Problematic because of vagueness</i>)	Document Ready Sites Fully Documented Sites Try to specify what "shovel-ready" entails
Bury the hatchet	Call for peace Call a truce
Hold down the fort	Cover the role (<i>This phrase stems from settlers and soldiers resisting "savages" when "on the warpath."</i>)
Submit	Process (<i>Depending on the context, the term can imply allowing others to have power over you.</i>)

2. Race and Ethnicity

- Black/African American: Capitalize Black "since this is how most Black people identify—when referring to cultures, ethnicities, and groups of people, names are often capitalized to reflect reality and respect." ¹

Instead of...	Consider using...
Minorities	Black, Brown, Indigenous, and People of Color (BBIPOC): <i>Can be used as a collective term for non-white people when truly talking about BBIPOC as a whole, but if actually referring to a specific population, be specific and avoid overgeneralizing.</i> Black and brown individuals/communities

	People identifying as multi-racial/ethnic (<i>acknowledges people's hybrid identities that are often ignored based on outward presenting phenotypes</i>)
Latinx (<i>may be most appropriate if this is how individuals self- identify</i>) ^{2,3}	<p>"Latino/a"</p> <p>Latinx (<i>when referring to persons of Latina/o heritage that are non-binary</i>)</p> <p><i>We acknowledge that the terms Hispanic and Chicano/a may be preferred in certain regions. For example, Hispanic in Texas and New Mexico and Chicano/a in Southern CA when specifically referring to people of Mexican origin or descent.</i></p> <p><i>There is important usage variation between Hispanic, Chicano/Chicana, Latino/Latina, or Latinx based on region, generation, and political inclination. Whenever possible, we will strive to use the language that is preferred by the group being described.</i></p>
Native American	<p>Native</p> <p>Indigenous</p> <p>American Indian</p> <p>Alaska Native</p> <p><i>When possible, use a Tribe's specific name.</i></p>
Represents	Identifies (<i>when referencing an individual that identifies with a certain community or group verses "representing" that group</i>)
Referring to racial and ethnic groups in the plural	Add populations, people, or communities to the racial or ethnic group references (<i>e.g. Black communities, Black people, Black populations</i>)
Inequities due to race	<p>Inequities due to racism and systemic oppression</p> <p>Racialized inequities (<i>demonstrates how categories of race have been used to oppress and disadvantage people, also recognized multi-ethnic persons</i>)</p>
Culturally competent	Culturally responsive Cross-culturally informed

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3. Socioeconomic Status

A general rule is to avoid language that focuses on blaming the individual or on what individuals are lacking. Instead focus on what people have.

Instead of...	Consider using...
Poor The poor Low-class people Poor people	People with low incomes Families/residents with low incomes People whose incomes are below the federal poverty threshold People whose self-reported income were in the lowest income bracket (define income brackets and levels if possible)
Vulnerable communities (does not necessarily need to always be avoided, but be thoughtful about how it is used)	Communities that are low income Under-resourced communities Underserved communities People who face a confluence of relatively severe and often interconnected hardships including, but not limited to, poverty, disability, lack of access to household or community resources, or lack of economic or educational opportunities. Read our Memo: Rethinking "Disinvested Communities" Communities experiencing inequities Communities experiencing racism and discrimination Be explicit about what the vulnerability is and how we are using it

Target population	Population served Priority/Focus population This may also be relevant when referring to populations by race/ethnicity, disability, health conditions, etc.
Low education Less educated	Live in neighborhoods with lack of access to educational opportunities Lack of access to educational opportunities
Achievement gap (related to education) High school dropouts	Opportunity gap People who have completed 10th grade People with less than a high school education
Struggling	Working hard to make ends meet Having to make ends meet on low wages People not receiving a living wage People facing barriers
Marginalized communities	Communities experiencing oppression Communities/populations marginalized due to [external variable]
Disadvantaged communities The projects The ghetto The inner city	Under-resourced Communities who face a confluence of relatively severe and often interconnected hardships including, but not limited to, poverty, disability, lack of access to household or community resources, or lack of economic or educational opportunities. Read our Memo: Rethinking “Disinvested Communities” Communities disadvantaged by... [be specific how communities have been disadvantaged] Low-income areas of the city (avoid conflating social class and race or ethnicity by using coded language like ‘inner city,’ ‘projects,’ or ‘ghetto.’ Specify race or ethnicity and measures of SES separately) “Acknowledge the historical roots, including public and private disinvestment, racist urban planning and housing policies, and racial inequity and income inequality more generally.” 1
Welfare mothers Welfare reliant	Mothers who receive TANF benefits (TANF= Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and is the proper term for the current welfare program in the U.S.) People who receive SNAP benefits (SNAP= Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, previously called food stamps) People who are unable to work because of a disability Families whose main income is from TANF benefits

The homeless Homeless people	People experiencing homelessness People living unhoused People who are unsheltered People who are living in a place not meant for human habitation, in emergency shelter, or in transitional housing
Disparities (this term lacks the systemic framing when discussing disadvantages and differences in well-being)	Inequities (Differences in well-being that disadvantage an individual or group in favor of another; these are systemic, patterned, and unfair) Disparities used when referencing preventable differences in the burden of disease or health outcomes as a result of systemic inequities (e.g. X population experience greater disparities in poor health outcomes related to diabetes)
“At risk” as an adjective (such as at-risk student or at-risk community)	Communities experiencing [specify inequity] Community at risk of ... Student at risk of... “At risk” (use in quotations, acknowledging this is a poorly named term/label and can be highly stigmatizing and place blame on individuals instead of systems)

*“It is important to note that SES terms such as ‘low-income’ and ‘poor’ have historically served as implicit descriptors for racial and/or ethnic minority people. Implicit biases around economic and occupational status can result in deficit-based language that blames individuals for their occupational, educational, or economic situation (e.g., “attendant economic deficits”) rather than recognizing a broader societal context that influences individual circumstances. Deficit-based language also focuses on what people lack rather than on what they possess.”⁵

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4. Disability

Instead of...	Consider using...
The disabled Disabled person* Handicapped Differently-abled	Ask the person living with a disability or a spokesperson for the organization representing a disability for preferred terminology. When that is not possible, use people-first language. Person living with a disability (<i>when appropriate, reference developmental disability, physical disability, etc.</i>)
Confined to a wheelchair Wheelchair bound	Person who uses a wheelchair

*The phrase “disabled people” is an example of identity-first language (in contrast to people-first language). It is the preferred terminology in Great Britain and by a growing number of U.S. disability activists. Syracuse University’s Disability Cultural Center says, “The basic reason behind members of (some disability) groups’ dislike for the application of people-first language to themselves is that they consider their disabilities to be inseparable parts of who they are.” For example, they prefer to be referred to as “autistic,” “blind,” or “disabled.” Several U.S. disabilities groups have always used identity- first terms, specifically the culturally Deaf community and autistic rights community.

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5. Health Conditions

(Physical Health, Mental Health, and SUD)

Instead of...	Consider using...
Describing the patient as their condition (e.g., diabetic, heart failure patient, cancer patient, mentally ill patient, etc.)	Person with... Person living with... Survivor of... Person with a history of... Person being treated for...
Behavioral health disorder/condition	Refer to mental health and substance use disorders specifically when possible
Suffering from (<i>relevant to other disorders/diseases outside of MH/SUD as well</i>)	People with People living with People with a history of People being treated for People recovering from
Substance abuse disorder	Substance use disorder
Committed suicide	Death by suicide
Abuse	<i>For illicit drugs:</i> use <i>For prescription medications:</i> misuse, used other than prescribed
Mentally ill People with mental illness Crazy (<i>this term should be avoided in all situations and is highly stigmatizing</i>)	Person living with a mental health condition/diagnosis Person living with mental health challenges
Committed suicide Completed suicide Successful suicide Failed suicide attempt	Died/death by suicide Non-fatal suicide attempt

Addict/ Addiction Abuse/ Abuser User Druggie (<i>this term should be avoided in all situations and is highly stigmatizing</i>) Junkie (<i>this term should be avoided in all situations and is highly stigmatizing</i>)	Person with a substance use disorder Person with an opioid use disorder Person with an alcohol use disorder Patient or client
Alcoholic	Person with alcohol use disorder
Former addict Reformed addict	Person in recovery
Clean	<i>For toxicology screen results:</i> testing negative <i>For non-toxicology purposes:</i> being in remission or recovery, abstinence from substances, not currently or actively using substances
Dirty	<i>For toxicology screen results:</i> testing positive <i>For non-toxicology purposes:</i> person who uses substances

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6. Victim/Survivor Language

Instead of...	Consider using...
Victim of domestic violence	Survivor of domestic violence
Crime victim Victims of crimes	Person who experienced a crime Person who experienced violence

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<https://www.rainn.org/articles/key-terms-and-phrases>

7. Language Spoken

Instead of...	Consider using...
Non-Native speaker	<i>Refer to the specific language when possible</i>
Non-English speaker	Limited English proficiency Speaker of a language(s) other than English Person with a preferred language other than English

8. Sex, Gender, Sexual Orientation

Sex: “Used to label a person as ‘male’ or ‘female’ (some US states and other countries offer a third option) at birth, this term refers to a person’s external genitalia and internal reproductive organs.”⁶

Gender: “The cultural roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes expected of people based on their sex” (man, woman, etc.).⁷ This refers to how we see ourselves.

- Gender binary: “A system that constructs gender according to two discrete and opposite categories: boy/man and girl/woman.”⁶
- Cisgender: “Refers to people whose gender identity aligns with their assigned sex at birth.”⁶ Often abbreviated as “cis.” Cis is a neutral descriptor, for example, “cis women.”
- Transgender: “Sometimes the term is used broadly as an umbrella term to describe anyone whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex. IT can also be used more narrowly as a gender identity that reflects a binary gender identity that is ‘opposite’ or ‘across from’ the sex they were assigned at birth.”⁶

Sexual orientation: “Refers to a person’s sexual and emotional attraction to another person and the behavior and/or social affiliation that may result from this attraction (lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc.)”⁷

Instead of...	Consider using...
She/he or her/him	They/ themselves <i>(If unsure of someone’s pronouns or when referring to a person more generally. When speaking about a specific person use the person’s preferred pronouns that are consistent with their gender identity. This might also include omitting gendered constructions when not necessary.)</i>
Sexual preference	Sexual orientation
Sex change Sex change operation Sex reassignment surgery	Gender confirming surgery Gender affirming surgery
Mankind	Humankind Humanity

Gay community Non-straight	LGBTQIA2S+ community
Homosexual	Gay Lesbian People identifying as gay/lesbian People identifying as LGBTQIA2S+
Gender binary (<i>assumes there are only two genders, man and woman and everyone is one or the other</i>)	<i>Acknowledge there are many gender identities, including transgender, gender neutral, non-binary, two spirit and others.</i>
Transsexual	Transgender
Gender nonconforming	Gender expansive Differently gendered Gender fluid

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<https://genderminorities.com/database/glossary-transgender/>

9. Immigration

Instead of...	Consider using...
<p>The undocumented</p> <p>Illegal alien</p> <p>Illegal immigrant</p>	<p>Individuals/people who are undocumented</p> <p>DACA students</p> <p>Mixed status families <i>(used to describe families with a combination of documentation statuses and acknowledges the complex immigration positions/statuses of many families)</i></p>

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