

Words matter. They shape perceptions and understanding, both of past and present events and of future possibilities and, therefore, future events. Semantic and public acceptance of terms like “formerly incarcerated” or “returning citizens” (rather than ex-felon, ex-offender, or ex-inmate) are of fundamental importance to the process of public opinion formulation, positive media images, effective social service delivery and, most importantly, progressive policy change. — Eddie Ellis

Language that is **helpful** in supporting health and well-being:

- “People-first language” respects the worth and dignity of all persons;
 - Person living with HIV;
 - Person living with depression;
 - Person who is formerly incarcerated;
- Focuses on the medical nature of substance use and mental health disorders and treatment;
- Promotes the recovery process and shifts the emphasis from pathology and suffering to resilience and healing;
- Avoids perpetuating negative stereotype biases through the use of slang and idioms;
- Supports the client in choosing her comfortable level of self-disclosure;
- Helps in recognizing strengths;
- Is non-judgmental and phrases questions in ways that are more acceptable, and normalizing but less stigmatizing;
- Is sensitive to stigma and discrimination;



- Reflects an understanding of the realities of the lives of individuals and incorporates their strengths and challenges.

Language that is **less helpful** in supporting health and well-being:

- Defines people by the crime for which they were convicted (i.e., murderer, robber, drug dealer);
- Defines people by their perceived legal status (i.e., drug offender, drunk driver, felon);
- Uses potentially moralistic language regarding drug and substance use disorders (i.e., alcohol or drug abuse, addict).

Helping Medical Providers Integrate Best Practices:

Meeting HIV Prevention, Treatment and Care Needs of Justice-Involved Persons in NYC

WORDS TO USE WHEN DISCUSSING CRIMINAL JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT

Avoid:	Say:
Ex-offender; Thug; Criminal; Ex-inmate; Ex-felon; Ex-con	Justice-involved individual, person, man or woman; Formerly incarcerated individual or person; Returning citizen
Convict; Inmate; Offender; Felon	Person who is/was incarcerated
Parolee; Probationer	Person on parole; Person on probation
Illegal immigrant	Residents without legal permission

WORDS TO USE WHEN DISCUSSING SUBSTANCE USE AND MENTAL HEALTH

Avoid:	Say:
Drug abuser; Addict; Junkie	Injecting drug user; Person affected by drug use; Drug users; Active drug users; Person with an addiction
Alcohol abuse; Drug abuse; Substance abuse	Substance use disorder (SUD)
Noncompliant; Unmotivated; Resistant	Opted not to; Has not begun; Experiencing ambivalence and change
Schizophrenic; Depressive	Person who has been diagnosed with schizophrenia or depression

WORDS TO USE WHEN DISCUSSING HIV/AIDS

Avoid:	Say:
AIDS when referring to HIV	HIV when referring to HIV; AIDS when referring to AIDS
HIV virus	HIV; Human immunodeficiency virus; The virus that causes AIDS
AIDS or HIV patient; Suffering from HIV; AIDS victim	Person living with HIV
To catch HIV or AIDS; To contract AIDS	To contract HIV; To become infected with HIV
To pass on HIV	Transmit HIV

WORDS TO USE WHEN DISCUSSING SEXUALITY AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Avoid:	Say:
Sexually transmitted disease (STD)	Sexually transmitted infection (STI)
Risky sex	Unprotected sex
Promiscuous	Having multiple partners
Prostitute; Hooker; Street walker	Sex worker; A person who is involved in transactional sex
Rape victim	Sexual assault survivor
High(er) risk group; Groups with high-risk behavior	High-risk behavior; Highly affected communities; Key populations at higher risk