



Disability Language Guide

For City of Portland official public communications

Language is ever-changing, and the disability community is no exception. There are passionate dialogues about “person first” language (e.g. *person with a disability*) or “identity first” language (e.g. *disabled person*), how disability should be defined, and whether we should use the term “disability” at all. Overlaps of language, culture, philosophies, and intersectionality all contribute to a dynamic blend of terms and identities.

This language guide is not intended to disrupt these important linguistic conversations. Instead, its purpose is to support City of Portland staff in avoiding the use of problematic disability terms in official City communications with the public, including **reports, public documents, job postings, proclamations, speeches, podcasts, and social media.**

Disability-Related Terms to Avoid

This chart lists terms for City staff to avoid. In rare cases when one of these terms must be used, it is **strongly** recommended that staff contact one of the City’s disability equity experts for guidance. Their contact information is provided at the end of this document.

	Avoid	Suggested Alternative(s)
1	Handicapped	Person with a disability
2	Invalid	Person with a disability
3	The disabled	Disability communities
4	Suffers from...Victim of...	Has a disability
5	Special needs	Person with a disability, disability communities
6	Cripple(d)	Physical disability
7	Wheelchair-bound	Uses a wheelchair, wheelchair-user
8	Mental retardation	Person with an intellectual disability
9	Insane	Mental disability, mental health disability
10	Crazy	Mental disability, mental health disability
11	Midget	Little person, person of short stature
12	Hearing impaired	People who are deaf or hard-of-hearing
13	Vegetative state	Person in a coma, comatose
14	Birth defect	Had a disability since birth
15	Brain damaged	Person with a brain injury



Frequently Asked Questions

1. *My friends with disabilities are using new terms like “differently abled” or “alter-abled”. Are these the right terms to use?*

There is a growing group of experimental terms, including: *diffabled*, *diffability*, *differently abled*, *alter-abled*, *handicapable*, and *diversability*. At this point in time, there is no broad community consensus on which of these new terms are “right”.

In official communications, it is recommended that City staff continue to use “people with disabilities” or “disability communities”. This may change in the future, but for now, these are generally noncontroversial terms that are clearly understood by most people.

2. *I was interviewing someone, and they said they’re hearing impaired / handicapped / etc. This is a problematic term, right? Should I mention their disability in my City of Portland article, and if so, what term do I use?*

First, is the disability relevant to the topic you’re writing or speaking about? If it has nothing to do with the story, then it should be left out.

If the disability is relevant, a suggestion is to write the sentence to make it clear that it’s a personal preference, e.g. “Jane Smith, who identifies as hearing impaired, said...”

This method respects a person’s identity without applying the term to a larger group of people who would disagree with that label.

3. *My colleague used an offensive disability term, but they have a disability themselves! What do I do?*

If they’re talking about themselves, then you don’t need to do anything. **Identity is a personal choice** and people self-identify using different terms.

Also, it’s possible that they may be using a term as part of “reclaimed” language, a movement where people with disabilities reclaim stigmatized language as a form of empowerment.

However – and this applies to all City of Portland staff regardless of disability status – if they deliberately use the term as a slur against another person or group while they’re at work, it’s okay to ask that they stop or use another term instead.

If the staff person continues to use the term in a derogatory way at work, or if they retaliate against you for speaking up, please let your manager and/or HR Business Partner know.

Not sure who your Business Partner is? Visit

<https://www.portlandoregon.gov/bhr/article/430513>



Additional Resources

- If your document is intended for a public audience (e.g. reports, flyers, maps, guides, emails), please add a **Meaningful Access Statement**. The City of Portland has standard text available that you can copy-and-paste at <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/oehr/71544>.
- If you have questions about a term that's not mentioned here, you may want to check out the **Disability Language Style Guide**, a comprehensive list of disability terms produced by the National Center on Disability and Journalism (NCDJ) that also offers recommendations for use. Visit: <https://ncdj.org/style-guide/>

Questions? Contact Us:

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