



**BENCHMARK**  
HUMAN SERVICES

FIRST EDITION



# WORDS MATTER.

At Benchmark Human Services (Benchmark), inclusivity is part of our DNA. Our mission has always been to help those who are marginalized -- whether a person with a disability, someone with a mental health crisis, or an infant born with disabilities or delays that set them apart from their peers - we have worked to ensure each person feels accepted and included for exactly who they are.

We believe inclusivity is critical in the workplace as well. Our goal is to ensure each person we serve and each person providing that care feels valued, respected, and like they have not only a seat at the table, but a voice there as well. That starts with how we communicate and the language we use. The way we describe ourselves and others is a powerful tool in affirming our identities and how we see and experience the world around us.

This inclusive language guide serves to educate Benchmark staff on ways to use language that shows respect and is free of stereotypes, prejudice, discriminatory views, or bias. As our understanding surrounding inclusion and identity grows, so will this guide. This is an evolving document and is a starting point.

It will take time to adopt some of these changes into our policies, marketing materials, and other forms of written and oral communication, but we are committed to working toward those changes. We are also open to feedback, especially from those who identify with populations/groups mentioned throughout this document, or populations we may have unintentionally neglected to include.

It's important to note that we are all learning. Maya Angelou said, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." None of us will get inclusive language right 100% of the time. What's important is learning from mistakes and working toward creating an environment that is inclusive and affirming of each person connected to Benchmark and its mission.

With Gratitude and Respect,  
Benchmark's Diversity Committee



# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Ableism** - The discrimination of and social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior.

**Ally** - Someone who makes the commitment and effort to recognize their privilege (based on gender, class, race, sexual identity, etc.) and work in solidarity with oppressed groups in the struggle for justice, understanding that it is in their own interest to end all forms of oppression, even those that they may benefit from in concrete ways.

**Bias** - A tendency to believe that some people, ideas, etc., are better than others that usually results in treating some people unfairly.

**Cisgender** - Denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex.

**Code-Switching** - Adjusting one's style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities.

**Discrimination** - The behavior or actions, usually negative, towards an individual or group of people, especially on the basis of sex/race/social class, etc.

**Equality** - Everyone is treated the same exact way, regardless of differences.

**Equity** - Everyone is provided with what they need to succeed.

**Ethnicity** - A social group that shares a common and distinctive culture, religion, or language.

**Gender Identity** - One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither - how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.

**Gender Fluid** - A person who is gender fluid is flexible in regard to the sex with which they identify. They believe that gender is non-binary, meaning that not all humans fit squarely into either the male or female category.

**Implicit Bias** - A bias or prejudice that is present but not consciously held or recognized.

**Inclusion** - The act of creating involvement, environments and empowerment in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued to fully participate.

**LGBTQIA** - Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, (questioning), intersex, asexual, and (agender).

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Microaggressions** - A comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group (such as a racial minority).

**Misgender**- Refer to (someone, especially a transgender person) using a word, especially a pronoun or form of address, that does not correctly reflect the gender with which they identify.

**Nationality** - The status of belonging to a particular nation, whether by birth or naturalization.

**Neurodiversity** - The range of differences in individual brain function and behavioral traits, regarded as part of normal variation in the human population (used especially in the context of autistic spectrum disorders).

**Nonbinary** - An adjective describing a person who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman. Non-binary people may identify as being both a man and a woman, somewhere in between, or as falling completely outside these categories.

**“FOR COMMUNICATION TO BE EFFECTIVE, IT NEEDS TO APPROPRIATELY ADDRESS ALL AUDIENCES FOR WHICH IT IS INTENDED. INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE ACKNOWLEDGES DIVERSITY, CONVEYS RESPECT TO ALL PEOPLE, IS SENSITIVE TO DIFFERENCES, AND PROMOTES EQUITABLE OPPORTUNITIES.”**

**LET’S BE REAL: INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE MATTERS**  
-- NEHA JAIN

**Race** - A category of humankind that shares distinctive physical traits such as skin color.

**Racism** - The belief in the natural superiority of one race over another.

**Sexual Orientation** - An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people. Note: an individual’s sexual orientation is independent of their gender identity.

**Transphobia** - Dislike of or prejudice against transsexual or transgender people.

**Stereotype** - A fixed idea that many people have about a thing or a group that may often be untrue or only partly true.

**Tokenism** - The practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to do a particular thing, especially by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups in order to give the appearance of sexual or racial equality within a workforce.

**Transgender** - An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, bisexual, etc.

**Prejudice** - An unjustified or incorrect attitude (usually negative) towards an individual based solely on the individual’s membership of a social group.

**Xenophobia** - An aversion or hostility to, disdain for, or fear of foreigners, people from different cultures, or strangers.

# GUIDING PRINCIPLES



# DISABILITY

## **People First Language vs. Identity First Language**

There is debate within the disability community on whether to use person-first language or identity-first language when describing a person who has a disability. Person-first language is language that puts a person before their diagnosis, such as being a person with a disability. Identity-first language is language that leads with a person's diagnosis, such as being a disabled person.

At Benchmark, we encourage use of people first language, but it's always best to ask the person what they prefer.

## **Avoid "Inspiration Porn"**

In her 2014 TedX talk, Stella Young, comedian and journalist coined the term inspiration porn to explain society's habit of looking at people with disabilities as inspirational. Disability is part of human diversity. It is not something to overcome. Persons with disabilities should not be portrayed as brave or inspirational, simply for having a disability. This is patronizing and implies that it is unusual for a person with a disability to be productive and live a fulfilled life.

## **Do not use Condescending Euphemisms**

Avoid the use of terms such as "handi-capable," "differently-abled," and "special." Use of these terms is offensive and implies that having a disability is something to be ashamed of.

## **Disability is not an Illness**

People with disabilities can be healthy, although they may have a chronic condition such as arthritis or diabetes. Persons with disabilities should not be referred to as patients unless they are under medical care. Expressions such as "suffers from", "afflicted with" or "stricken with" are inappropriate.

## **Behavior Tips**

- Use a normal volume of voice, don't patronize or talk down.
- Never attempt to speak or finish a sentence for the person you are talking to.
- Speak directly to the person, even if they have staff, family, friends, an interpreter, etc. with them.

## **Labels to avoid:**

- Wheelchair-bound; confined to a wheelchair
- Vision-impaired
- Hearing-impaired
- Low functioning, high functioning

## **Use instead:**

- Wheelchair user, person with a physical disability,
- person who uses a wheelchair
- Low vision, vision loss, blind
- Hard of hearing, hearing loss, deaf or Deaf
- High support, low support

# GENDER/SEX/SEXUALITY

Gender, sex, and sexuality are all separate concepts. Sex is assigned at birth and refers to the biological differences between males and females such as reproductive organs, chromosomes, hormones, etc. Gender is how one identifies – male, female, nonbinary, transgender, gender fluid, etc. Sexuality or sexual orientation describes a person’s romantic or sexual attraction.

## **Avoid Gendered Nouns and Assumptions**

Gendered nouns include words like mankind, manpower, mailman, and steward, stewardess. Instead of these words try non-gendered nouns like humanity, staffing, mail carrier, and flight attendant. Avoid addressing groups as “ladies” or “guys.” Instead say “colleagues” or “friends.” Do not modify nouns with gender when the sex of the person goes against conventional expectations. In other words, do not say “male nurse” or “female doctor” when the gender of the person is irrelevant to the story or conversation.

## **Pronouns**

Gender pronouns are terms people choose to refer to their gender identity, such as he/him, she/her or they/them. Some people identify outside the gender binary, meaning they do not specifically identify as male or female. Knowing and respecting a person’s chosen pronouns makes that person feel valued and respected. It is always okay to ask a person what pronouns they prefer.

When not referring to a specific person, it’s best to avoid using gendered pronouns and instead use they/them. For example, instead of saying “Each individual served reviews his or her individual service plan” instead say “Each individual served reviews their service plan.”

## **Avoid Assumptions about Marital Status/Family Make-Up**

Don’t make assumptions about marital or family relationships (for example, use significant other or partner instead of husband and wife; use parent or caregiver instead of mother and father).

## **Sexuality**

Do not use terms like “preference” or “lifestyle choice” when referring to members of the LGBTQIA community.

## **Transgender**

- It is not appropriate to ask someone if they are trans or transitioning.
- It is not appropriate to ask a transgender individual which part of the transition they are currently in.
- A biological man who is transitioning into a woman is a transgender woman, or transwoman.
- A biological woman who is transitioning to a man is a transgender man, or transman.

# RACE, ETHNICITY, AND NATIONALITY

Many people confuse race, ethnicity, and nationality. Race describes physical characteristics such as skin color; ethnicity is based on language and shared culture; and nationality refers to citizenship.

Avoid identifying people by race, color, or national origin, unless it is appropriate for context, and do not assume that a person's appearance defines their nationality or cultural background.

Be aware that some references can, often unintentionally, have negative racial connotations. The term "black" is often used in words/phrases with negative implications – for example, black sheep, blackmail, black market, black magic – while white is often associated with purity and innocence.

The term "minority" may imply inferior social position and is often dependent on geographic location. Use historically underrepresented racial groups or people of color instead of minorities.

There may not be universal consensus around terminology. For example, some indigenous American groups use the term Native American while others prefer American Indian or First Nation. Learn how distinct groups or individuals with whom you interact prefer to self-identify.

Actively avoid racial and ethnic slurs and any language that infers or endorses stereotypes based upon racial or ethnic associations.

# RELIGION

Diversity is present within any religion or belief. Avoid broad statements about any particular religion as they generalize all groups and do not recognize their unique practices or beliefs.

Do not assume a person's religious belief by their name or country of origin. When referring to a building where someone goes to worship, use "place of worship" instead of "church."

Do not assume that someone celebrates specific religious holidays such as Christmas, Easter, or Hanukkah. Use generic terms like holidays or ask the person directly, which holidays they celebrate.

When referring to groups of individuals from the same religion, refer to them as a community. For example, use Jewish people instead of Jews, and Muslim community instead of Muslims.

# MENTAL HEALTH

As with people with disabilities, err on the side of people-first language when it comes to mental health. Do not describe people as mentally ill or defined by a condition. Instead use:

- Mental health conditions
- Mental health
- People with anxiety
- A person with depression
- A person with a mental health condition

Phrases such as 'OCD' have become more common when describing someone who is particularly clean and tidy or 'bipolar' when talking about everyday mood swings. Avoid using these common terms as they minimize the issues experienced by those with a clinical diagnosis.

Avoid derogatory terms like schizo, paranoid, or psycho. These should never be used to joke, mock, or offend.

# AGE

Avoid referring to someone's age, unless it's relevant (for example, when referring to benefits that are available to people of certain ages).

Actively avoid ageist terms such as elderly or youngsters. Instead say seniors, older people, or child or teenager, for example. Don't use age as a means to describe an individual or group where it is not relevant, such as 'mature workforce' or 'young and vibrant team'.

Don't use women or older relatives as substitute for novice or beginner. For example, don't say something is so simple your grandmother can do it.

# SOCIO-ECONOMICS

People who live or grew up in an area with less resources are often stigmatized. Use intentional and judgment free language such as under-resourced or low-opportunity communities with high-poverty rates, a person experiencing homelessness or people without homes.

Avoid offensive terms like thug, ghetto, or white trash when referring to those from under-resourced communities.