



**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**  
**Department on Disability Services**  
**Office of the Director**

Implementing the People First Respectful Language Modernization Amendment Act of 2012

The “People First Respectful Language Modernization Amendment Act of 2012,” (“People First Act”), effective September 26, 2012, “remove[s] offensive, dated language referring to persons with disabilities, including the term mental retardation, and replace[s] it with respectful language that puts people first.” Specific examples include but are not limited to replacing the term “mental retardation” with “intellectual disability;” replacing the terms “lunatic” and “mentally ill” with “person with a mental illness;” replacing “wheelchair-bound resident” with “resident who uses a wheelchair;” replacing “handicapped tags” with “tags for persons with disabilities; and, for people with intellectual disabilities, replacing the terms “customer” and “consumer” with “individual.”

The People First Act also creates an obligation to end the use of the “R” word, forth going, in all District of Columbia laws, regulations, rules, policies and publications. The law requires that all new, revised or republished District regulations, rules, policies or publications, and all internet publications shall avoid the use of the terms "mental retardation," "mentally retarded," and "retarded," except as required by any law or regulation. Specifically, the law requires that:

- Where the term "mental retardation" is used, the term "intellectual disability" or "intellectual disabilities" shall be substituted;
- Where the term "intermediate care facility for persons with mental retardation" is used, the term "intermediate care facility for persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities" shall be substituted;
- Where the term "qualified mental retardation professional" is used, the term "qualified developmental disability professional" shall be substituted; and
- Where the term "is at least moderately mentally retarded" is used, the term "has at least a moderate intellectual disability" shall be substituted.

District of Columbia agencies were required by the People First Act to have replaced the “R” word, as described above, in all policies and signage by March 26, 2013. Likewise all District of Columbia publications shall replace the “R” word, upon the earlier of reprinting or by September 26, 2013, which is one year following the effective date of the Act.

In addition to the meeting the statutory mandate discussed above, District of Columbia agencies can embrace the spirit of the legislation by using People First language in all of our policies, regulations, rules and publications, as well as in how we talk about people. Attached

are guidelines to using People First language, called “Put People First – Words Matter,” that were written by Project ACTION!, the District’s advocacy group for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and Quality Trust for Individuals with Disabilities (“Quality Trust”). The guidelines, finalized in September 2012, focus on the impact of language on people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. After receiving the guide, the Department on Disability Services (DDS) met several times with Project ACTION! members and Quality Trust to talk about how DDS could become a leader in using People First language.

While the People First Act is important in that it ends the use of the “R” word in all official District of Columbia policies, rules, laws and publications, it is just the start of recognizing the impact that the language we use has on people with disabilities. Additional recommendations include:

- Use the words “person” or “people” when referring to people with disabilities. Avoid the use of labels. People should not generally be described as “clients, consumers, beneficiaries, patients, or participants.” Likewise, for people with intellectual disabilities, the word “individual” has become a label meaning person who receives support from the Developmental Disabilities Administration (“DDA”). When DDS met with Project ACTION!, they told us that the only people they hear called individuals are people with intellectual disabilities. They asked that we stop using that term, and simply call them people, just like everyone else.
- Put the person first, not his or her disability. For example, say “person with a disability,” rather than “disabled,” or “handicapped person.”
- Our language should recognize that assistive technology is a tool to help people. For example, say “John uses a wheelchair,” instead of “John is wheelchair-bound.”