




Government of the District of Columbia  
**Department on Disability Services**

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**DDS TRANSMITTAL# 24-02**

**TO:** All Department on Disability Service Providers

**FROM:** Crystal Thomas, Program Manager, State Office of Policy, Planning and Innovation 

**DATE:** May 15, 2024

**RE:** Respectful Language Policy

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The Department on Disability Services (DDS) releases the Respectful Language Policy, 2024-DDS-POL001, which revises the People First Respectful Language Policy, 2014-DDS-POL004, supplemented by “Put People First! – Words Matter!” guidance published by the Quality Trust for Individuals with Disabilities, Inc. and Project ACTION!.

In 2014, the Department on Disability Services (DDS) published its People First Respectful Language Policy. This Policy established People First Respectful Language as the standard governing oral and written communication when referring to people with disabilities. The Policy brought DDS into compliance with D.C. Law 19-169, the “People First Respectful Language Modernization Amendment Act of 2012” (“People First Act”).

The past People First Respectful Language Policy imposed two restraints on all official written and oral communication. First, all DDS employees, providers, consultants, and volunteers were to “avoid the use of the ‘R’ word, except where specifically required by law.” Second, those stakeholders were required to use language that “put[s] the person before his or her disability, e.g., ‘person with a disability,’ rather than ‘disabled’ or ‘handicapped.’”

DDS is a person-centered organization committed to treating each person with dignity and respect and empowering them to develop their own goals based on what is important to and for them. Since 2014, however, more people with disabilities, especially members of the Deaf, blind, and autistic communities, have come to contend that “identity-first” language—for example, referring to someone as a “Deaf person,” or an “autistic person”—can, in centering the whole of a person’s identity, truly treat the person with dignity and respect. The rationale for this shift is that people cannot, and may not want to be, separated from their neurodiversity, deafness, or blindness.



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The purposes of this Policy are 1) to continue to implement the People First Act; and 2) to reaffirm respectful language as the norm in all agency and relevant stakeholder communications. Most of the time, using “respectful language” will take the form of using person-first language. This revised Policy, however, also gives DDS employees and other stakeholders the opportunity to meet people where they are, referring to individuals by their preferred terminology, to the extent that it is compatible with the dignity of the person supported and other people similarly situated.

DDS is grateful for feedback from Project ACTION!, the Home and Community-Based Services Policy Advisory Group, and community members.

If you have any questions about this policy or procedure please contact Crystal Thomas, Program Manager, State Office of Policy, Planning and Innovation, at [\(202\) 730 1751](tel:2027301751) or [crystal.thomas2@dc.gov](mailto:crystal.thomas2@dc.gov)