



FEMA

Office of Disability Integration and Coordination
Federal Emergency Management Agency
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20472

Language Guidelines for Inclusive Emergency Management

FEMA is committed to emergency management language and practices that are inclusive of people with disabilities and recognizes the power of language in setting the stage for successful whole community efforts.

The table below offers language guidelines when referring to people with disabilities, people who may be disproportionately impacted during a disaster, and other with access and functional needs. These guidelines are based on several basic, key principles:

- Use ***people-first*** language; place the emphasis on the individual instead of the disability.
- Use terms consistent with the integration mandate in the *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)*, which requires public agencies to provide services “in the most integrated setting appropriate to the needs of individuals with disabilities.”
- Use language that is respectful and straightforward.
- “Disability” is a legally defined term for a protected class of individuals and remains an appropriate term.
- When referring to “access and functional needs,” FEMA is referring to people with and without disabilities who have physical, programmatic, and effective communication accessibility requirements. Meeting disaster survivors’ access and functional needs ensures equal access to emergency programs for the whole community.
- Refer to a person’s disability only if it is relevant.
- Avoid terms that lead to exclusion (e.g., “special” is associated with “separate” and “segregated” plans and services).
- Avoid terms that are judgmental, negative, or sensational (e.g., special, brave, courageous, dumb, frail, super-human, vulnerable).
- Avoid making assumptions or generalizations about the level of functioning of an individual based on their diagnosis or disability. Individuals are unique and have diverse abilities and characteristics.
- Avoid all forms of certain outdated terms (e.g., “special needs” and “handicap”).
- Avoid acronyms (e.g., PWD, AFN, etc.) when referring to people.

Language influences behavior. Inclusive behavior is a powerful ingredient for achieving successful outcomes that are beneficial for the whole community. The meaning behind a message can get lost if inappropriate terminologies are used. As Mark Twain said, “the difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.”

Terminology to Use versus Terminology to Avoid

Preferred Terminology and Examples	Terminology and Examples to Avoid
People with disabilities	The handicapped; the disabled; the impaired; the challenged
Individual or person with a disability	Disabled person; PWD; PAFN
Access and functional needs; the access and functional needs of people with or without disabilities; people with disabilities and others with access and functional needs	Special needs; vulnerable; vulnerable populations; AFNs; she's an AFN
Equal access; universal access; universal design; physical access, program access, and effective communication access; reasonable accommodation	Special access; handicapped access; special accommodations; AFN accommodations
Disproportionate impact; disproportionately impacted	Vulnerability; vulnerable populations; special populations; at-risk populations
Deaf; hard of hearing; hearing loss; sensory disability; deaf-blind	Deaf and dumb; the deaf; deaf mute; hearing impaired
Accessible communication; effective communication	Special communication; special needs communication
He has a speech disability	He has a speech impairment; speech impediment
He is blind; he has low vision	The blind; sight impaired; vision impaired
She has a mobility disability	She's mobility impaired; physically challenged; crippled; an invalid; lame; differently-abled; bedridden; house-bound; shut-in
She has... (e.g., multiple sclerosis, cancer, etc.)	Suffers from, afflicted with; stricken with; impaired by
He uses a wheelchair; he uses a scooter; he uses a mobility device	Wheelchair bound; confined to a wheelchair; wheelchair person
Assistive devices; assistive technology; and durable medical equipment	Handicapped equipment; special devices
Power chair; motorized wheelchair; scooter	Electric wheelchair; electric chair; cart
She sustained a spinal cord injury; she has paralysis; she is a spinal cord injury survivor; she has paraplegia/quadruplegia/limb loss	She's paralyzed; she's a cripple; she's trapped in her body; her body is lifeless; crippled; useless
Prosthesis; prosthetic limb	Fake leg; wooden leg; peg leg

Preferred Terminology and Examples	Terminology and Examples to Avoid
He has cerebral palsy	He's spastic; palsied
He has epilepsy; he has seizures	He has spells or fits
She is a little person; she has dwarfism; he is of short stature	She's a dwarf; she's a midget
She has Down syndrome	She's Downs; a Down's kid; mongoloid; retarded
He has a learning disability	He is learning disabled; slow; slow learner; dumb
A person with an intellectual disability; developmental disability	The mentally retarded; retard; retarded; mental retardation; mentally impaired
A women with a cognitive disability; a person with dementia or Alzheimer's Disease	Senile; demented
A child with a traumatic brain injury or a person who sustained a head injury	Brain damaged; slow
He has autism; He is autistic (this is not people-first language, but it is preferred by many people with autism on the autism spectrum).	Mental; mentally impaired; retarded; dumb
She has a mental illness; mental health support; psychiatric disability; she has a diagnosis of schizophrenia or bipolar disorder; uses behavioral health services	Emotionally disturbed; disturbed; crazy; psycho; schizo; insane; manic; manic depression; mental; mental patient; he's a behavior problem; he needs behavior management; she's a problem child; he is crazy; they are out of control
Congenital disability; sustained a birth injury; acquired at birth	Birth defect; defective
Children who receive special education services; children with Individual Education Plans	Special education kid; special needs child; rides the short bus; SPED; he's special ed; he is special needs
Senior; older person; older adult; or older adult with a disability	The frail; elderly; the elderly
Accessible bathroom; accessible parking; accessible housing; accessible transportation	Handicapped bathrooms; handicapped parking; special needs housing; special housing; special transportation
Medical needs; acute medical needs; health care needs	Special Medical Needs
She requires support or assistance	She has a problem with...
Planning with people with disabilities; disability inclusive planning	Planning for the disabled

Preferred Terminology and Examples	Terminology and Examples to Avoid
Whole community planning; inclusive planning; integrated planning	Special needs planning; special plans; special needs annex
Universal cot; accessible cot	ADA cot; special needs cot; special medical cot
Personal assistance services; personal care assistance for children, youth, and adults; caregiver (more appropriate with children)	Patient care, caregiver (for an adult); carer; takes care of
Functional needs support services in a general population shelter; accessible shelter; universal shelter	Special needs shelter; special shelter; special functional needs shelter
Medical Shelter	Special Medical Shelter
Person who receives or utilizes disability services	Client; patient (unless referring to the acute care services of a nurse or doctor); consumer; burden; welfare case
Disaster survivor	Disaster victim (when used to describe an individual who survived the disaster)

Resources for Inclusive Language and Inclusive Emergency Management

- FEMA disability-related topic webpage: <http://www.fema.gov/disability>.
- FEMA Office of Disability Integration and Coordination webpage: <http://www.fema.gov/office-disability-integration-and-coordination>.
- “Language Is More than a Trivial Concern” by June Isaacson Kailes: <http://www.jik.com/language%20FINAL-L-12.27.10.pdf>.
- “Moving beyond ‘Special Needs’: A Function Based Framework for Emergency Management and Planning” by Alexandra Enders and June Isaacson Kailes: <http://www.jik.com/HHS%20Special%20Needs%20 2 .pdf>.
- U.S. Department of Justice Revisions to ADA Requirements – Effective Communication: <http://www.ada.gov/effective-comm.htm>.
- People First Language webpage by the Nebraska Statewide Independent Living Council (NESILC): <http://www.nesilc.org/personfirst.html>.
- Directive Number: 065-01: Nondiscrimination for Individuals with Disabilities in DHS-Conducted Programs and Activities (Non-Employment): http://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/dhs-management-directive-disability-access_0.pdf.
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) video: “Our Commitment to Implementing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act across DHS:” <https://www.dhs.gov/our-commitment-implementing-section-504-rehabilitation-act-across-dhs>.

- “A Guide to Interacting with People who Have Disabilities: A Resource Guide for DHS Personnel, Contractors, and Grantees from the Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties” - http://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/guide-interacting-with-people-who-have-disabilities_09-26-13.pdf.
- DHS “Tips for Effectively Communicating with Protected Populations during Preparedness, Response, and Recovery” webpage: <http://www.dhs.gov/publication/tips-effectively-communicating-protected-populations-during-preparedness-response-and>.
- “Don’t Call Me Special” on Curbcut.net: <http://curbcut.net/advocacy/dont-call-me-special/>.