Handicapping Language

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES: “Handicapped” has a negative connotation for many people, so most social service agencies and news organizations now use “person with a disability.” Handicap describes a condition or barrier caused by society or the environment, i.e., “She is handicapped by inaccessible transportation,” or “stairs are a handicap to him.”

PERSON FIRST: The person precedes the disability, both figuratively and literally. It’s “people with disabilities,” not “disabled persons,” and “person with cerebral palsy,” not “cerebral palsy victim.”

AVOID PITY: People with disabilities aren’t “victims.” As one woman who uses a wheelchair noted, “I’m not a wheelchair victim. Wheelchair victims are the people I bump into with my footrest at the supermarket.” Nor should people be described as “inspirational” or “courageous” just because they have a disability.

ADJECTIVES AREN’T NOUNS: Use an adjective as a description, not a category or group, i.e., “people who are disabled,” not “the disabled,” and “person with epilepsy,” not “an epileptic.”

AVOID BEING CUTE: Terms like “physically challenged,” “special” and “differently-abled” are patronizing. If appropriate, note that a person has a physical, sensory or mental impairment and leave it at that. Also, people without disabilities aren’t “normal,” because that infers that people with disabilities are abnormal. Rather, they are “non-disabled” or “ablebodied.”

GERMANENESS: People with disabilities should be treated just like everyone else. You wouldn’t mention the physical condition of a non-disabled person unless it was germane to the conversation or story, so unless a person’s disability is relevant, leave it out.

Below is a list of outdated expressions and recommended alternatives:

OBJECTIBLE .......... PREFERRED
afflicted ................. has
birth defect ............... disabled since birth, born with
cripple, crip .......... walks with the aid of crutches
defective ............... impaired
deformed ............... has a physical disability
dummy ............... pre-lingually deaf
Elephant Man’s disease .. neurofibromatosis
emotionally disturbed .. behavior disordered
epileptic ............... has epilepsy
former mental patient .. mentally restored
handicapped .......... disabled, disability
handicapped accessible .. accessible to people with disabilities, fully accessible
hearing impaired .......... deaf or hard of hearing
hunchbacked ............... has a spinal curvature
insane, deranged, deviant .. has a mental impairment
lame .............. walks with a limp, uses crutches
midget, dwarf .......... short-statured or little person
Mongoloid idiot .......... Down syndrome
normal ................. non-disabled, ablebodied
paralytic, arthritic ....... is paralyzed, has arthritis
retarded ............... cognitive disability, developmentally disabled
spastic ............... has seizures, muscular dystrophy
wheelchair-bound or confined to a wheelchair .... uses a wheelchair

If you have questions about appropriate terminology or interviewing etiquette, call the Illinois Department of Rehabilitation Services’ Division of Media and Public Affairs at 217/785-3893 (TTY).