



Language Guidelines for Inclusive Emergency Preparedness, Response, Mitigation and Recovery

FEMA is committed to working towards 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 for referring to people with disabilities and others who may be disproportionately impacted in a disaster. This chart is based on several key principals:

- 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 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”, we are referring to people with and without disabilities who have physical, programmatic and effective communication accessibility requirements. Meeting access and functional needs enables 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 acronyms (PWD, AFN) when referring to people.

Language influences behavior. Inclusive language is a powerful ingredient for achieving successful outcomes that are beneficial for the whole community.

Preferred	Avoid
People with disabilities	The handicapped, the disabled, the impaired, the challenged
An 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 who also have access and functional needs	Special needs, vulnerable, vulnerable populations, AFNs, she’s an AFN

Preferred	Avoid
Equal access, universal access, universal design, physical access, program access, effective communication access, reasonable accommodation	Special access, handicapped access, special accommodations, AFN accommodations
Disproportionate impact	Vulnerable populations, special populations, at-risk populations
Deaf, hard of hearing, hearing loss, sensory disability	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 ... (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, 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, has paraplegia, quadriplegia, limb loss, amputee	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
He has cerebral palsy	He's spastic, palsied
He has epilepsy, he has seizures	He has spells, 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 woman 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 term is preferred by some 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	Birth defect, defective

Preferred	Avoid
injury, acquired at birth	
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
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)

The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. – Mark Twain

Links

<http://www.fema.gov/office-disability-integration-and-coordination/>
<http://www.jik.com/language%20FINAL-L-12.27.10.pdf>
<http://www.jik.com/HHS%20Special%20Needs%20 2 .pdf>
<http://www.ada.gov/effective-comm.htm>
<http://www.nesilc.org/personfirst.html>
<http://www.disabilityisnatural.com/explore/people-first-language>
http://dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/dhs-management-directive-disability-access_0.pdf
<http://dhs.gov/video/video-commemorating-40th-anniversary-section-504-rehabilitation-act-1973>
http://dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/guide-interacting-with-people-who-have-disabilities_09-26-13.pdf
<http://www.dhs.gov/publication/tips-effectively-communicating-protected-populations-during-response-and-recovery>
<http://www.rtcil.org/documents/Your%20Words,%20Our%20Image%20th%20Ed..pdf>
<http://www.hiddc.org/language.htm>
<http://curbcut.net/advocacy/dont-call-me-special/>