OFFICE OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY & BELONGING

WORDS MATTER

A GUIDE FOR INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IN COMMUNICATIONS AT NJ DCF

NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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Purpose of the Guide

The purpose of this guide is to provide both a glossary of terms and guidance for DCF's written and oral communications, in support of the Office of Diversity, Equity and Belonging's (DEB) strategic goal to continually develop our collective cultural humility.

This guide aspires to provide preferred terms for select population groups and attempts to represent our ongoing shift towards non-stigmatizing language. It is recommended to use this guide to reflect upon word choices and choose words carefully, inclusively, and appropriately for a specific use and audience.

This is not about being "PC" in the pejorative sense – it *is* about respecting and honoring differences in our shared humanity, respecting all people.

DEB's Strategic Goal of Cultural Humility: It is said that cultural competency is a *process* rather than an end product. Cultural humility is one construct for understanding and developing a process-oriented approach to competency. It can be conceptualized as the "ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is *other-oriented* (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity <u>that are most important to the [person].</u>" (Waters, n.d.)[1] One goal for transforming our DCF culture is to build a lifelong commitment throughout our organization for self-evaluation and critique, to work to fix power imbalances, and to develop relationships and partnerships with people or groups who may be different from your own.

Best practice includes engaging people from the population or community of focus to find out what identity language they prefer. Whenever possible, ask the person or people with whom you are communicating how they prefer to be identified.

Best practice includes engaging people from the population or community of focus to find out what identity language they prefer. (CDC, 2022)[2] Whenever possible, ask the person or people with whom you are communicating how they prefer to be identified.

People and Groups

This guide addresses people who have been and are, frequently, and historically excluded from mainstream social, economic, educational, and/or cultural life, and the dominant white culture. Examples of these populations include, but are not limited to race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, language, immigration status and socio-economic status.

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[1] Waters, A. and Asbill, L. (2013) Reflections on cultural humility (apa.org)
[2] CDC.gov (2022) Preferred Terms for Select Population Groups & Communities | Gateway to Health Communication | CDC

Evolution of Language & Terminology

Language and communications around the world have changed and evolved since recorded history. As our society changes, appropriate identity language follows, some of these changes have been rapid, particularly as a result of the changing identity language of millennials and GenZ. For example, it is no longer acceptable to refer to transgender people as "transgenders" or "transvestites." Not all Black people identify as African American, and many people from Latin America and Hispanic people feel labels do not adequately reflect their culture or identity. This guide will be updated often as language continues to evolve.

General Writing Advice (APA Style, 2020)[3]

In most cases, write with a sixth- to eighth grade reading level in mind to ensure clarity in the message. Simple words and phrases usually create a stronger message than long-winded sentences and phrases. Focus on relevant characteristics, acknowledge relevant differences that exist, be appropriately specific, be sensitive to labels – *respect the language people use to describe themselves* – i.e., refer to people as they refer to themselves, and acknowledge people's humanity.

- Be as specific as possible, whenever possible.

- If you find yourself relying on generalizations, do some research into the groups of people, topics, or locations you are writing about.

- Use *people-first* language. For example, say "person with a disability" instead of "disabled person."

- Use active voice when writing (versus passive voice). You can typically identify the use of passive voice by looking for "to be" verbs (is, was, are, etc.). Active voice places the emphasis on the person doing the action.

- Remember, "progress not perfection." Sometimes, you will get it wrong or forget and that's OK. Take a moment, acknowledge it, and commit to doing better next time. Change is a process, and it is important that we hold each other accountable in a supportive way.

Avoid (CDC, 2022)[4]
- Use of adjectives such as vulnerable, marginalized, and high-risk
- De-humanizing language (e.g., disabled person); use person-first instead (e.g., person with a disability)
- Remember there are many types of sub-populations

REMEMBER

Respect the language people use to describe themselves – acknowledge people's humanity.

Use *people-first* language (e.g., person with a disability instead of 'disabled person.'

Terminology and language evolve, sometimes frequently, refer to the date of this document to see when it was last updated.

Progress, not perfection: Sometimes we may get it wrong or forget. Acknowledge it and commit

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[3] APA, (2020) General principles for reducing bias (apa.org)
[4] CDC.gov, (2022) Key Principles | Gateway to Health Communication | CDC

- Using words like target, tackle, combat, or other terms with violent connotation when referring to people, groups, or communities
- Unintentional blaming language
- Jargon

Identifying Labels and Terms (Diversity Style Guide, 2023)[5]

Remember: Whenever possible, ask the person or people concerned how <u>they</u> would like to be identified

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Race

American Indians, Native Americans, Native **All of these terms are acceptable**. The consensus is that whenever possible *Native people prefer to be called by their specific tribal name*. In the United States, Native American has been widely used, but is falling out of favor with some groups, and the terms *American Indian or Indigenous American* are preferred by many Native people, according to the National Museum of the American Indian.

- **First Nation** is the preferred term for native tribes in Canada.
- **Indian** is used to describe the peoples and cultures of the South Asian nation of India. It should not be used as a replacement for American Indians.
- **Indigenous** is an adjective and refers to the original inhabitants of a place and is not specific to the United States. Indigenous people is another term that can be used to describe the original inhabitants of a place.
- **Native nation** is a preferred term over *Tribe*. Native nations are independent nations within a nation. The term nation shows respect for sovereignty and the fact that Native nations each have their own systems of government. Globally, we have trivialized the term Tribe. We don't recommend using Tribe or Tribes to talk about Native nations. Some phrases or even names of Native nations contain the word Tribe or a derivative (Tribal colleges, for example). It's OK to use Tribe in these cases (according to the Native Governance Center).

Asian American **Asian American is the proper term** for people who come from Asia or descend from people who lived in Asia. Do not hyphenate. When possible, ask people how they identify (e.g., Asian American, Chinese American, Japanese American).

AAPI AAPI is an acronym for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. **Avoid using this acronym** and do not use it as a blanket term when a more specific one is available. It is appropriate to spell out when relevant. It is OK to use in direct quotes and in reference to organizations, such as Stop AAPI Hate.

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[5] Diversity Style Guide – Helping media professionals write with accuracy and authority (2023)

biracial, multiracial Biracial is normally used for someone who has parents from two different races. While multiracial is used when someone has parents from two or more races — such as a child having a half-Colombian, half-Trinidadian mother, and a father who is German, Nigerian, and Korean. The terms biracial and multiracial should only be used if it is relevant to what is being written and if someone self identifies as such (according to Anti-Racism Daily). If cultural background is needed, be specific about heritage.

> Example: She has a Black mother and a Guatemalan father. These terms are usually better suited for describing large, diverse groups of people rather than individuals.

> Example: In a research report, biracial women shared how they prefer to be identified.

Black, African American **The capitalized term Black** is an example of how language evolves over time. This reflects a shared identity and culture rather than a descriptor of skin color. African American (no hyphen) is a term used for people who share a lineage that can be traced directly or indirectly to Africa. African American is not necessarily interchangeable with Black. For example, people who live in America of Caribbean heritage may prefer Caribbean American. **Always follow the person's preference**.

CAPITALIZING
The National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) and the CDC recommend *whenever a color is used to appropriately describe race, then it should be capitalized, including White and Brown*

Black can be used as an adjective in a racial, ethnic, or cultural sense: Black people, Black culture, Black literature, Black studies, Black colleges. Black should not be used as a singular noun.

White or white There is currently a lack of consensus on use of upper or lower case, but **do not use Caucasian**. Of note, the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) recommends that **whenever a color is used to appropriately describe race then it should be capitalized, including White and Brown.**

Brown or brown **Avoid this term** as a racial, ethnic, or cultural descriptor unless it is part of direct quote or how someone prefers to be identified. Per the above, if used, the NABJ recommends capitalizing Brown. See Hispanic and Latino below.

Dual heritage When noting someone with dual heritage, a hyphen is not needed. Always follow a person's preference.

> Example: African American, Mexican American, Turkish German

Hispanic and Latino In all instances when referring to persons from primarily Spanish-speaking cultures, **be as specific as possible**. Always ask how someone prefers to be identified, which could include multiple identifications such as "Latina and Mexican American." If a broader term is absolutely necessary, **use "Hispanic and Latino."** For example, "The grant will be focused on

identifying play deserts in primarily Hispanic and Latino neighborhoods." See examples below for specific definitions.

- **Chicano** A term that Mexican Americans in the U.S. Southwest sometimes use to describe their heritage. Use only if it is a person's preference.
- **Hispanic** An umbrella term referring to a person whose ethnic origin is in a Spanish-speaking country, as well as those living in the United States with Latin American ancestry, except for those from Brazil, which is not a Spanish-speaking country.
- **Latino, Latina** Umbrella terms referring to those living in the United States with Latin American ancestry. Latina is the feminine form of Latino. Latino is the masculine form.
- **Latine** A gender-neutral form of Latino/Latina, currently more popular in locations outside the United States. Benefits of "Latine" include that it is easier to pronounce in Spanish and can be applied to other gendered terms in Spanish, e.g., "elle" instead of "ella" or "el."
- **Latinx** A gender-neutral term form of Latino/Latina. Some people from Hispanic and Latino cultures have not adopted it for different reasons, use if it is a person's or your audience's preference.

People of color **Use caution with this term**. It can be acceptable in broad references to multiple races other than white. Be aware that many people object to the term for various reasons, including that it lumps together anyone who isn't white into one monolithic group or creates a binary between People of Color and White. As always, be as specific as possible. Other terms may be more appropriate, such as:

- ▪ People from various racial and ethnic backgrounds
- ▪ Diverse groups
- ▪ Different cultures

Also, avoid using the term "Black, Indigenous and people of color," which some see as more inclusive by distinguishing the experiences of Black and Indigenous people, but others see as less inclusive by diminishing the experiences of everyone else. **Do not use the shorthand POC or BIPOC** unless necessary in a direct quotation.

Do not use person of color to describe an individual.

CAUTION WHEN USING:

- PEOPLE OF COLOR
- BLACK, INDIGENOUS AND PEOPLE OF COLOR
- BIPOC

INSTEAD CONSIDER:

- PEOPLE FROM VARIOUS RACIAL AND ETHNIC BACKGROUNDS
- DIVERSE GROUPS
- DIFFERENT CULTURES

Gender Identity[6] (Wamsley, 2021)

Sex assigned at birth is the assignment of individuals to a sex category by medical practitioners at birth and is typically based on the appearance of external genitalia. Sex assigned at birth is then recorded on the birth certificate as female, intersex, or male.

Gender is often defined as a social construct of norms, behaviors and roles that varies between societies and over time. Gender may be categorized as male, female, nonbinary, fluid/genderfluid, transgender man, transgender woman, or in another **gender as defined by the person.**

Gender identity **is one's own internal sense of self and their gender**, whether that is man, woman, neither or both. Unlike gender expression, gender identity is not outwardly visible to others. Gender Identity may be separate from someone's sex assigned at birth or their sex characteristics, the message to be most affirming is to avoid any personal discussions about someone's sex traits and characteristics. For transgender people, gender identity differs in varying degrees from the sex assigned at birth.

Gender expression is how a person presents gender outwardly, through behavior, clothing, voice, or other perceived characteristics. Society identifies these cues as masculine or feminine, although what is considered masculine or feminine changes over time and varies by culture.

Cisgender sometimes cis, is an adjective that describes a person whose gender identity aligns with their sex assigned at birth.

Agender refers to a person who does not identify with any particular gender or who identifies without gender.

Transgender is an adjective used to describe someone whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth. A transgender man, for example, is someone who was assigned female at birth and now identifies as male.

TRANSGENDER

Is an adjective used to describe someone whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth. A transgender man, for example, is someone who was assigned female at birth and now identifies as male.

Nonbinary is a term that can be used by people who do not describe themselves or their gender as fitting into the binary categories of as male or female. A range of terms are used to refer to gender identities that fall within non-binary identities; nonbinary, gender-expansive, agender, and genderqueer are among the terms that are sometimes used but this is not an exhaustive list.

Gender Non-conforming (GNC) (PFLAG, 2023)[7] An umbrella term for those who do not follow gender stereotypes, or who expand ideas of gender express or gender identity. GNC does NOT

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[6] Wamsley, L., 2021 A Guide to Understanding Gender Identity and Pronouns : NPR
[7] PFLAG National Glossary of Terms | PFLAG (2023) https://pflag.org/glossary/

mean non-binary and cisgender people can be GNC as well. It is important to respect and use the terms people use for themselves, regardless of any prior associations or ideas about those terms. While some parents and allies use the term *"gender expansive"* **gender non-conforming is the preferred term by the LGBTQ+ community; always use the term preferred by an individual with whom you are interacting.**

Gender transition is a social and/or medical process a person may choose to undergo in order to express their gender identity. Transitioning is a personal journey for each individual and regardless of if someone has undergone any steps to transition, a person's gender identity and affirming pronouns should be respected and honored. Social and medical transitioning can include any, none, or all the following: telling one's friends, family, and co-workers; changing one's name and pronouns; updating legal documents; medical interventions such as hormone therapy; or surgical intervention, often called gender confirmation or gender-affirming surgery. While social transitioning is often discussed more openly, for example with name or pronoun changes, it is not appropriate to discuss someone else's medical transitions unless you are part of that person's medical team.

Gender Dysphoria refers to psychological distress that results from an incongruence between one's sex assigned at birth and one's internal sense of their gender identity. Not all transgender or non-binary people experience gender dysphoria, and those who do may experience it at varying levels of intensity.

Gender Dysphoria Disorder is a diagnosis listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders and is required as a diagnosis for individuals to receive gender-affirming medical care or treatment.

Pronouns[8] (Eagan, n.d.)
The role of pronouns in acknowledging someone's gender identity

Everyone has pronouns that are used when referring to them – and getting those pronouns right is not exclusively a transgender issue. Using affirming names and pronouns is form of basic human dignity and respect. Counter to this, using the wrong pronouns and names intentionally is a form of violence and can cause, both short and long term, emotional and psychological harm to individuals and communities. Following are recommended best practices regarding pronouns in the workplace:

1. **Consider including your pronouns** in your email signature or name at work to foster a culture of inclusivity. Remember that for some LGBTQ+ people, disclosing their pronouns may be a source of anxiety so don't force this practice on others.
2. **Incorporate neutral language in greetings**. Instead of "Hey, guys!" or "Welcome, ladies!", use **"Welcome, everyone!"** to make sure all participants feel acknowledged, safe, and included.
3. **If you make a mistake and someone corrects you**, say "Thank you" instead of "I'm sorry" to own the responsibility for your mistake. Practice using someone's pronouns so that you can get this

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[8] Eagan, S., ADP, Best Practices for Using Pronouns in the Workplace and Everyplace! (adp.com)

right as soon as possible. Having to correct others who misgender them is exhausting for many transgender and non-binary people.

4. **Use "they or their" wherever possible**, as opposed to "his or her" to include people who may not identify with the pronouns his or her.

5. **Respect a person's privacy and journey**. Although it is good to ask what pronouns or name a person uses, never ask anyone about gender affirming surgeries or medical transitioning status. Not asking someone about their medical history or plans for surgery is common sense at work regardless of someone's gender identity.

6. **Remember that you can't tell someone's gender just by looking at their appearance**. So, share your pronouns first and invite others to share theirs with you.

If you make a mistake, say "Thank You" to own the responsibility and practice using the person's pronouns to avoid making the mistake in the future

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Why might someone's name be different than what's listed on their ID?

The policies and processes for updating all government identifications are onerous. For example, a person may be able to update their driver's license, Social Security card and passport, but not birth certificate. Remain mindful to refer to people by the name they use regardless of their documents.

Sexual Orientation (HRC.org, n.d.)[9]

Sexual orientation is *separate from gender identity*.

Sexual orientation refers to the enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or other genders, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and straight orientations. People don't need to have had specific sexual experiences to know their own sexual orientation. They need not have had any sexual experience at all. They need not be in a relationship, dating or partnered with anyone for their sexual orientation to be validated. For example, if a bisexual woman is partnered with a man, that does not mean she is not bisexual.

GLAAD notes, "Transgender people may be straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer. For example, a person who transitions from male to female and is attracted solely to men would typically identify as a straight woman. A person who transitions from female to male and is attracted solely to men would typically identify as a gay man."

Intersex is an umbrella term used to describe people with differences in reproductive anatomy, chromosomes or hormones that don't fit typical definitions of male and female.

Intersex can refer to a number of natural variations, see What is intersex? Frequently Asked Questions and Intersex Definitions (interactadvocates.org). Being intersex is not the same as being nonbinary or transgender, which are terms typically related to gender identity.

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[9] HRC.org Glossary of Terms - Human Rights Campaign (hrc.org)

LGBTQIA+ Acronym which stands for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and agender/asexual/ally" with a "+" sign. This acronym has evolved over time to recognize diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Different variations, such as LGBT, LGBTQ+, and LGBTQIA2S+, may be used by other individuals, groups, and resources.

LGBTQIA+
The acronym for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex" with a "+" sign to recognize the evolving and limitless sexual orientations and gender identities used by members of the community.

Intersex is used to describe variations of sex characteristics, which could include mixed chromosomes, elements of both male and female reproductive systems, or genitalia that do not appear clearly male or female at birth

Queer **is a** term people often used to express a spectrum of identities and orientations that are counter to the mainstream. Queer is often used as a catch-all to include many people, including those who do not identify as exclusively straight and/or folks who have non-binary or gender-expansive identities. This term was previously used as a slur but has been reclaimed by many parts of the LGBTQI+ movement.

CAUTION

Because queer can still be used in negative ways, or may feel harmful to people in older generations, *this term is encouraged to be used with caution or if you are in community*

For additional terminology and definitions, please visit PFLAG at [PFLAG National Glossary of Terms | PFLAG](#)

Pregnancy (Godfrey-Isaacs, n.d.)[10]

Women and pregnant people or *pregnant people/person* are recommended when referring to people who are pregnant, in consideration of Trans and gender non-conforming persons. Again, as best practice, ask the individual how they prefer to be identified whenever possible.

Age

"Older adults" **is preferred over senior citizens**, seniors, or elderly as a general term when appropriate and relevant. It is best used when referring to groups of people and not specific individuals. Always be specific when possible, using someone's age instead of categorizing them as an older adult. Senior is acceptable in direct quotations and in names (e.g., senior center).

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[10] Godfrey-Isaacs, L. https://www.all4maternity.com/whats-in-a-name-gender-inclusion-in-maternity-and-beyond

Physical Ability

Disability When describing an individual, **do not reference their disability** unless it is clearly pertinent to the story. If it is pertinent, it is best to use language that refers to the person first and the disability second. For example: "The writer, who has a disability" as opposed to "the disabled writer." When possible, refer to a person's specific condition. (National Center on Disability and Journalism)

> Differently-abled This term has been used as an alternative to "disabled," "handicapped" or "mentally retarded." **Currently, it is not considered appropriate.** Some consider it condescending, offensive or a way to avoid talking about disability. **"Person with a disability"** is a more neutral term than "differently-abled."

> Handicapped **Avoid using "handicap" and "handicapped"** when describing a person. Instead, refer to the person's specific condition or use "person with a disability." The terms are still widely used and generally acceptable when citing laws, regulations, places, or things, such as "handicapped parking," although many prefer the term "accessible parking." Avoid **"handicapable,"** as it will not be understood by many.

DISABILITY

"Differently-abled" is currently NOT CONSIDERED APPROPRIATE

Instead, use "**person with a disability**"

Ablest micro-aggressions are everyday verbal or behavioral expressions that communicate a negative slight or insult in relation to someone's gender identity, race, sex, disability, etc. Phrases like this imply that a disability makes a person less than, and that disability is bad, negative or a problem to be fixed, rather than a normal, inevitable part of the human experience. (Access Living) Examples:

> "That's so lame."
> "That guy is crazy."
> "You're acting so bi-polar today."
> "Are you off your meds?"
> "It's like the blind leading the blind."
> "We need to be aware of our blind spots."
> "My ideas fell on deaf ears."
> "She's such a psycho."
> "I'm super OCD about how I clean my apartment."
> "Can I pray for you?"
> "I don't even think of you as disabled."

Blind/legally blind/visually impaired Use "blind" only when the person has complete loss of sight and "legally blind" when the person has almost complete loss of sight. Other terms also may be acceptable. It is best to ask the person which term they prefer and take that into consideration. (National Center on Disability and Journalism)

deaf/Deaf Some people with mild or moderate hearing loss may affiliate themselves with the Deaf community and prefer to be referred to as "deaf" instead of "hard of hearing." Alternatively, some who are deaf and don't have a cultural affiliation to the Deaf community may prefer the term "hard of hearing." Lowercase when referring to a hearing-loss condition or to a deaf person who prefers lowercase.

Capitalize for anyone who identifies as members of the Deaf community or when they capitalize Deaf when describing themselves. "Deaf" should be used as an adjective, not as a noun; it describes a person with profound or complete hearing loss. (National Center on Disability and Journalism)

Language

Referring to people whose first language is not English use **"non-native [English] speakers"** (NNS) or **"multilingual students."**

The term "multilingual" respects both people's ability to function in more than one language and the challenge they sometimes face when writing in English. "NNS" and "multilingual" are often more accurate expressions than "English as a Second Language" (ESL) because English may be a person's third or fourth language or beyond.

Immigration Status

Individuals who are undocumented come from a variety of countries and ethnic groups. Although their status may be illegal, the people themselves are not. Moreover, families may have a mix of documented and undocumented individuals in the same family. Be specific about which group is being included.

Immigrants: **Never use the term "illegal" to describe a person.** If a person lacks legal permission to live or work in the United States, you can refer to them as an "**undocumented**" immigrant or **someone with a complex immigration status**. (Sierra Club)

Socio-economic Status (APA, 2020)[7]

Use person-first language instead and define income brackets and levels if possible. The terms "low class" and "poor" are pejorative.

Socioeconomic status (SES) encompasses not only income, but also educational attainment, occupational prestige, and subjective perceptions of social status and social class. SES encompasses quality of life attributes and opportunities afforded to people within society and is a consistent predictor of a vast array of psychological outcomes.

Homeless refers to an individual who lacks a fixed or regular residence. Some people prefer the term **unhoused**. When possible, ask which term people prefer. Use person-first language such as **people experiencing homelessness**.

> **Avoid: "homeless people" or the "homeless."**
>
> The term, "homeless shelter" may be used, although some prefer the term, "emergency shelter."

Low income/low-income **Low-income communities is an acceptable term**, but it is important to note that "low income" or "low-income community" have historically served as an implicit descriptor for people of marginalized races and/or ethnicities. It is important to include racial and/or ethnic descriptions along with socioeconomic status when relevant. For example, "the grant will help park and recreation professionals reach low-income and middle-income Puerto Rican families."

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[7] APA (2020) Socioeconomic status (apa.org)

Poor **is not a recommended term**. Instead use people-first language, such as "**people whose incomes are below the federal poverty threshold**" or "people whose self-reported income were in the lowest income bracket."

Poverty is a level at which someone lacks income, resilience and access to resources and services.

Persons with Lived Experience[8]

This term is currently recommended when communicating about community members who are partnering in our work. 'Lived experience' is defined as individuals who have gained personal knowledge through first-hand involvement.[9] The partnership with and voices of PWLE are invaluable in seeking appropriate solutions, system changes and transformation.

Other acceptable terms: Community member(s), or Credible Messengers. Ask the person/group how they would like to be identified.

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[8] Understanding preferred language for 'people with lived experience' - Camden Coalition (camdenhealth.org)
[9] Lived experience - Oxford Reference

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