



Partners for Reentry Opportunities
in Workforce Development

Person-First Language

Calling a person convicted of a crime a "criminal, felon, or offender" defines them only by a past act and does not account for their full humanity or leave space for growth. These words promote dangerous stereotypes and stoke fear, stigmatizing people convicted of crimes and making it harder for them to thrive.

Better alternatives center a person's humanity first and foremost, such as "a person convicted of a crime." Words and phrases matter and choosing person-first language is a step toward asserting the dignity of those entangled in the justice system.

Traditional Terms	Person-First Term
Ex-Offender, Ex-con, Offender	Directly impacted individual or formerly incarcerated individual
Criminal	Person convicted of a crime
Felon	Person convicted of a felony
Sex Offender	Individual convicted of a sexual offense
Prisoner	Individuals in incarceration
Addict, Substance abuser	Person with a history of substance misuse

When marketing PROWD programs, grantees can project new thinking and approaches about the justice system. Grantees should consider fresh ways of discussing the justice system that promote progressive improvements to the system.

Old	New
Punish crime or prevent harm	Promote community safety
Law and order	Accountability, equal justice, and due process
Tough on crime	Smart and appropriate responses
War on crime/drugs/poverty	Prevention, solutions, and alternatives
Drug treatment	Treatment for substance misuse

Language is powerful. It shapes thoughts and attitudes and can seriously affect how society sees and treats groups of people. People impacted by the criminal justice system are often

denied their dignity. We can all work to show them respect by using language that acknowledges their dignity.

RESOURCES

[Using Person-First Language in Media Communications](#) (JustLeadershipUSA)

This toolkit contains suggested strategies that center and uplift person-first language in a more respectful way that is more effective at advancing criminal justice reform.

[Words Matter: Don't Call People Felons, Convicts, or Inmates](#) (Vera Institute)

This resource provides a list of preferred words and phrases that center a person's humanity.

[Words Matter: Using Humanizing Language](#) (Fortune Society)

This resource provides appropriate words and phrases to use when describing persons with justice system involvement, a history of substance use, mental health needs, etc.

[The Marshall Project: The Language Project](#)

This resource contains a series that walks readers through the organization's style guide, explaining how and why they shifted to using person-first language. It also features essays by directly impacted persons and the importance of our words.