

## **Language use - Talking about disabilities**

### **Words Matter**

Words and how we use them make a difference in the way we describe people and how we relate to them.

Words are important and powerful tools in shaping ideas, perceptions, and attitudes.

Words are the mirrors of society's perceptions and attitudes. Some of the most difficult barriers people with disabilities face are people's attitudes.

Language use has changed over the years. Disparaging and dated words have been replaced with precise terms which have specific meanings, are not interchangeable and respect people with disabilities.

People often don't know how to refer to people with disabilities. They may be embarrassed or afraid they might say the wrong thing or they simply may not know the proper words. We hope the Guidelines on the next page will help.

### **General Guidelines**

- Put the person before the disability;
- A "disability" is a functional limitation;
- A 'handicap' is an environmental or attitudinal barrier;
- The word "disabled" is an adjective, not a noun. People are not conditions. Use "people with disabilities"; do not use "the disabled";
- Use words that are non-judgmental, non-emotional and are accurate descriptions;
- Do not use trendy euphemisms and expressions such as "physically challenged", "differently able", or "special". These terms are generally seen by people with disabilities as patronizing, avoiding reality and inaccurate. Keep to simple language, such as "people with disabilities";
- Do not use "victim of", "suffers from", "confined to a wheelchair", "afflicted". These terms diminish the person's dignity and magnify the disability;
- Avoid labeling people with disabilities as courageous, superhuman, poor or unfortunate;
- Use : "person who has a developmental disability";
- Use : "person who is blind or has low vision";
- Use : "person who is hard of hearing or deaf".