ACCURATELY AND RESPECTFULLY TALK ABOUT PEOPLE'S IDENTITIES, SITUATIONS, AND ROLES IN SOCIETY

Within all discourse, there are terms that most accurately and respectfully acknowledge people's identities and positions within society. In general, consider using language that puts personhood first and emphasizes humanity.

This can often be done by using terms as adjectives rather than nouns (i.e. Black or White people vs. Blacks and Whites; LGBTQ people vs. gays and lesbians; young people vs. youths) or by actively putting "people" first (i.e. people with disabilities vs. disabled people; people living in poverty vs. poor people; people who are homeless vs. homeless people). Here are a few examples:

X "EX-CON," "CRIMINAL," OR "FELON." Terms that label people by past or present convictions posed against them reduce their identity to the violations they've been accused of rather than their humanity. Instead, describe people as people first and foremost, not by their mistakes.

✓**INSTEAD:** People with felony convictions; people who have been incarcerated.

X "MINORITY." The word *minority* is originally a mathematical term meaning "the smaller part or number; a number, part or amount forming less than half of the whole." As demographics shift in our nation, the accuracy of such a term is fleeting. However, it is most important to scrap the term because of its diminutive connotation. Try using "people first" terminology instead.

✓**INSTEAD:** People of color.

RETIRE OUTDATED AND PROBLEMATIC PHRASES AND METAPHORS

There are some phrases and colloquialisms with discriminatory or offensive roots, which are sometimes little known. It is important to learn, and then retire, these terms when possible.

Aim to avoid idioms or phrases that have obvious or even subtly demeaning connotations related to groups or cultural traditions. Here are a few examples:

X "TURN A DEAF EAR," "TURNING A BLIND EYE" OR "THE BLIND LEADING THE BLIND." It is best to avoid idioms that cast a negative connotation on people's various physical abilities. Drop the idiom and instead use terms that cut to your point without offending others.

✓**INSTEAD:** Ignoring, insensitive, misguided.

X "POW-WOW." A pow-wow is an inter-tribal social gathering that includes dance, singing, and ceremonial elements. Many tribes and Native organizations hold them on a regular basis. Using this term out of context to refer to a meeting or a quick chat or conversation trivializes the significance of these gatherings.

✓**INSTEAD:** Chat, brief conversation, quick talk, brainstorm.

X "LOW MAN ON THE TOTEM POLE." Totem poles are monuments created by tribes of the Pacific Northwest to represent and commemorate ancestry, histories, people, or events. The term "low man on the totem pole," when used as an idiom to describe a person of low rank, inaccurately trivializes the tradition and meaning of the totem poles, which do not have a hierarchy of carvings based on physical position.

✓**INSTEAD:** Person of lower rank, junior-level.

X "GYPPED." The term *gypped* is used colloquially to imply being ripped off or swindled. The dated term derives from "gypsy" and perpetuates negative and UNFAIR STEREOTYPES.

✓**INSTEAD:** Ripped off, swindled, cheated, conned.

THE SOCIAL JUSTICE PHRASE GUIDE

5 GUIDELINES FOR CONSCIENTIOUS COMMUNICATIONS

Advancing a social justice agenda starts with being smart and deliberate in how we frame our discourse. The Social Justice Phrase Guide is your go-to tool to craft inclusive messages. Whether developing language for your organization, communicating through media platforms, or engaging in personal discussions, follow these guidelines to successfully communicate across communities.

This guide is a collaboration of Advancement Project, a multi-racial civil rights organization, and The Opportunity Agenda, a social justice communication lab.

Advancement Project
...just democracy!

The Opportunity Agenda
Moving Hearts, Minds, and Policy for Lasting Change

5 TIPS AT A GLANCE:

* TALK ABOUT POLICIES AND SOLUTIONS IN REALISTIC AND ACCURATE WAYS THAT SPUR THE ACTION SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATES WANT.
* LIFT UP UNITY, PARTICIPATION, AND COOPERATION OVER DIVISION, EXTREME INDIVIDUALISM, AND COMPETITION.
* REINFORCE PROSPERITY OVER SCARCITY.
* ACCURATELY AND RESPECTFULLY TALK ABOUT PEOPLE'S IDENTITIES, SITUATIONS, AND ROLES IN SOCIETY.
* RETIRE OUTDATED AND PROBLEMATIC PHRASES AND METAPHORS.

TALK ABOUT POLICIES AND SOLUTIONS IN REALISTIC AND ACCURATE WAYS THAT SPUR THE ACTION SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATES WANT

It is imperative that social justice communications include a clear path toward a solution. Leaving this out can leave audiences hopeless, with just another list of "what's wrong" in the world. In outlining these solutions, messengers should thoroughly examine the implications of word choices to avoid reinforcing values that are problematic to a social justice mindset, such as militarism or extreme individualism. A few examples:

X **"REFORM"** (used with education, immigration, welfare, tax, etc.). As linguist Anat Shenker-Osorio points out, we don't tend to try to "reform" things that we like. In all of these cases, it's the policies that we want to reform, but by skipping that word, we are maligning public education, immigration, or taxes themselves.

✓**INSTEAD:** Clearly identify what we want to reform: policies, rules, approaches, etc. (e.g. education policy reform).

X **"TOUGH ON CRIME," OR "WAR ON DRUGS."** Research shows that militaristic language and punitive metaphors inspire fear and lead to unduly harsh policy responses.

✓**INSTEAD:** Investing in healthy and safe communities; a healthy and safe approach to laws about drugs.

LIFT UP UNITY, PARTICIPATION, AND COOPERATION OVER DIVISION, EXTREME INDIVIDUALISM, AND COMPETITION

It is important to choose language that emphasizes shared interests and discredits "us vs. them" distinctions. By highlighting the cultural, economic, and historical connections we all share, communications can emphasize a community-focused mindset over staunchly individualistic thinking.

Bad policies hurt us all, threatening values and disrupting communities. Good policies move us all forward. Instead of metaphors and phrases that encourage extreme individualism or competition, social justice advocates should consider phrases that reinforce interconnectedness and the value of cooperation. For example:

X **"LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD."** Team-based metaphors suggest that someone always must win and someone else must lose.

✓**INSTEAD:** Emphasize the common good, that we're stronger together. We should share the "ladder of opportunity" and not pull it up behind us.

REINFORCE PROSPERITY OVER SCARCITY

Our country has an abundance of resources, and should be a place where everyone has an equal opportunity. To reinforce that idea, we should avoid discussing options and policy approaches in zero-sum terms, which tap into the fear-based part of our brain that is concerned about scarcity and individual survival.

Advocates can keep conversations productive by pointing to how policies and programs benefit society at large.

Here are a few common scarcity pitfalls to be aware of:

X **"DIVIDE UP THE PIE," OR "DO MORE WITH LESS."** Discussing resource allocation in competitive terms or saying certain folks need to "do more with less" pits groups against one another instead of providing a space to work collaboratively toward mutually beneficial outcomes.

✓**INSTEAD:** Emphasize that we're a prosperous country that should include everyone in enjoying our national wealth – but our plentiful resources are disproportionately divided right now to the benefit of a select few.

X **"MAKING TOUGH CHOICES," OR "REIN IN SPENDING."** Using economic arguments as the basis for social change belies the moral reasons to adjust systems and policies to be in line with our values. For example, the ills of mass incarceration and flawed drug policy need to be addressed not only because current approaches are too costly, but also because they inflict harm on families, communities, and society.

✓**INSTEAD:** Speak to commonsense reasons for changing misguided policies that don't fit with our society's values.

X **"ON WELFARE/FOOD STAMPS/SECTION 8."** Talking about people being "on welfare" or "on food stamps" reinforces the scarcity-based view that those individuals are "on the dole" getting something for nothing. But these shared programs exist to benefit society overall. We don't talk about people being "on the U.S. Postal Service" or being "eligible to use the interstate highway system." Context helps illustrate how a program is fulfilling its purpose and reinforces how that support will be there for others when they face hard times.

✓**INSTEAD:** Describe programs in context – a young person who used TANF as bridge while between jobs, a family that used Section 8 to find a home closer to work and school.