November 5, 2024

Heart@Work LLC

"We do the right thing."

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Changing from the old to new

Guideline for replacing "Homeless and Homelessness." Labels

Here are some alternative words and phrases that focus on people's experiences and situations rather than labels. Changing the vocabulary around homelessness is about shifting perspectives and fostering empathy. Here are some key reasons:

1. People without stable housing
2. People experiencing housing insecurity
3. Neighbors navigating housing challenges
4. People seeking shelter
5. Community members in need of housing
6. Unsheltered or displaced
7. People living unhoused
8. Residents and Mental Health
9. People moving forward together
10. Unhoused individuals

WHY?

Words have power, let's not define people's situation, of who they are. Words can diminish a person's humanity.

1. **Humanizing Language:** Words like "homeless" reduce people to a single characteristic. By using terms like "*people without stable housing*," we center on their humanity, not just their housing status.

2. **Breaking Stereotypes:** The term "*homeless or homelessness*" often brings to mind specific, sometimes negative stereotypes. Alternative phrases broaden understanding and help the public recognize that people experiencing housing instability come from varied backgrounds.

3. **Emphasizing Temporariness:** Language that describes people as "*experiencing*" a situation or "*navigating*" a challenge suggests that homelessness is a condition that can change, rather than a defining trait. This can inspire hope and foster support for solutions.

4. **Reducing Stigma:** "*Homeless*" can carry a stigma that isolates people. Alternatives like "*neighbors in need of housing*" encourage empathy and connection, helping to reduce feelings of shame and marginalization.

5. **Encouraging Action and Solutions:** Words have power in shaping attitudes and policies. When we use language that reflects the realities of housing insecurity, it can motivate communities and policymakers to address root causes and work on solutions rather than simply seeing people as a "*problem*" to be managed.

6. **Acknowledging Systemic Issues:** Words like "*housing insecurity*" or "*housing challenges*" highlight that the problem often stems from systemic factors, like high living costs, rather than individual failures. This promotes a shift toward solutions that address these broader issues.

Let's dive deeper...

- **Labels Reinforce "Othering"**: The term "*homeless or homelessness*" can subconsciously create a divide, marking people as an "*out-group*." This "*othering*" can make society view those without homes as fundamentally different, which fuels bias and social exclusion.

- **Dehumanizing Language Leads to Dehumanizing Treatment:** Words carry implicit meanings. When people are labeled as "homeless," it can make it easier for society to distance itself emotionally. This can lead to discriminatory practices like exclusion from public spaces or services and a tolerance for policies that would be unacceptable if applied to housed individuals.

- **Assumptions of Fault and Blame:** The label “homeless” can trigger assumptions that individuals are responsible for their situation, which leads to judgment and, ultimately, discrimination. Alternative language like “*people experiencing housing insecurity*” acknowledges that housing issues are often out of an individual’s control, such as due to lack of affordable housing or systemic issues, rather than personal failings.

- **Influences on Policy and Law Enforcement:** Discriminatory language can affect how society views what’s fair and just. When people are called “homeless,” they’re often seen as burdens on public spaces or “problems” to solve, which has led to policies that criminalize sleeping in public spaces or panhandling. More humanizing language can encourage policies that support, rather than punish, people in need.

- **Impacts on Mental Health and Self-Perception:** Labels like “*homeless*” carry stigma that can damage a person’s self-worth and mental health, often creating an internalized sense of shame. When people are labeled according to a difficult experience, they’re more likely to face discrimination in employment, housing, and social settings, making it harder for them to overcome their challenges.

- **Worsens Community Divides:** When words like “*homeless or homelessness*” are used, they tend to imply danger or unpredictability. This stigma reinforces fear and misconceptions, leading communities to distance themselves or oppose initiatives like shelters and affordable housing, which would benefit both the people in need and the broader society.

By shifting language, we can reduce this discrimination and encourage a mindset that respects and values everyone as part of the community. When people see others as individuals with names, needs, and aspirations, rather than as a "homeless or homelessness" group, it fosters empathy and can motivate more inclusive, supportive solutions.

It avoids acknowledging the complex factors at play and often shifts attention to personal shortcomings rather than structural issues. Breaking down the causes helps shift the narrative toward solutions and more compassionate understanding.

- ***Lack of Affordable Housing:*** A vast majority of people experiencing housing instability are in that situation due to the lack of affordable housing. Housing prices in many areas have far outpaced wages, and many working families struggle to find affordable, stable places to live. This is a systemic problem, not a personal failing, and requires solutions like affordable housing development, rent stabilization, and housing subsidies. Labeling individuals as "those people" hides this truth and shifts focus away from policy solutions.

- ***Economic Hardship and Job Insecurity*:** Beyond housing costs, economic instability plays a huge role. Job loss, unexpected medical expenses, or lack of access to a living wage can quickly destabilize a person's housing situation. Many people are just one financial setback away from losing their homes. Recognizing this, rather than blaming "those people," creates awareness that housing insecurity can affect anyone, especially in today's economic climate.

- ***Mental Health and Addiction:*** For some, mental health challenges and substance use disorders are contributing factors. However, it's important to remember that these issues often arise as a result of, or are worsened by, unstable housing conditions. People without stable homes face enormous stress, which can intensify anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. Additionally, without access to healthcare or support systems, people have few options for managing these conditions.

- ***Lack of Supportive Networks:*** Social support plays a major role in preventing homelessness. People who have strong networks of family or friends may find temporary housing or financial support if they fall on hard times. Focusing on "***those people***" overlooks how support networks and safety nets impact housing security.

- ***Systemic Barriers:*** Factors like discrimination in housing, healthcare, and employment, as well as a lack of accessible services, also contribute to housing insecurity. People facing these barriers may be systematically excluded from stable housing options. By focusing on "*those people*" as a monolithic group, society fails to recognize the role that systemic issues play.

To recapture the beginning of this paper to choose alternative words or language or labels when talking about homeless or homelessness people.

1. **People *without stable housing***
   - Useful in discussions focused on the systemic nature of housing instability. Emphasizes that housing is unstable or temporary rather than focusing on the individual's lack.
2. **People experiencing housing insecurity**
   - Ideal for policy discussions and advocacy, highlighting the fluid and uncertain nature of housing challenges.
3. **Community members in need of shelter**
   - This phrase reminds listeners that housing insecurity can impact any community member and reinforces a sense of shared responsibility.
4. **Residents navigating housing challenges**
   - This can be useful in community outreach, emphasizing that housing issues are temporary challenges to overcome.
5. **People impacted by the housing crisis**
   - For discussions on root causes, this wording acknowledges that housing insecurity often results from broader societal issues, like the affordable housing shortage.
6. **Individuals in housing transition**
   - This language is hopeful and solution-oriented, suggesting that people are on a journey toward stability.

7. **People without permanent homes**
   - Works well in general contexts, underscoring that the housing issue is not necessarily about choice but about access to stable, permanent housing.
8. **Unhoused neighbors**
   - This is excellent for community-based language, reminding others that people facing housing insecurity are members of the same community.
9. **People living unhoused**
   - Good for general conversation, as it emphasizes the condition of living rather than an identity. It also feels less permanent.
10. **People seeking housing stability**
    - This phrase recognizes that people are often in pursuit of stable housing, framing the situation in an active, positive light.
11. **Community members affected by housing instability**
    - Similar to "*impacted by the housing crisis,*" this is suitable for policy discussions and news articles, emphasizing how external factors contribute to housing issues.
12. **Individuals facing barriers to housing**
    - Works well in contexts where specific barriers, like discrimination or income instability, are being discussed.
13. **Housing-vulnerable populations**
    - This is often used in data or policy contexts. It's helpful for discussions on preventive measures and support programs.
14. **Neighbors in need of supportive housing**
    - Ideal for discussions on solutions, such as supportive housing programs for individuals facing complex challenges.
15. **Housing-challenged individuals**
    - This phrase can be used in community or educational contexts to help audiences understand that the issue is related to challenges rather than personal failure.

16. **Individuals in temporary living situations**
    - Highlights the often-transient nature of housing insecurity, reminding others that many people facing housing challenges don't live in permanent shelter.
17. **Moving forward**
    - A hopeful, future-focused phrase that suggests people are actively moving toward stable housing with the right support.
18. **Community members with limited housing access**
    - This language focuses on access and opportunity, useful in conversations about systemic inequities.
19. **Families affected by housing un-affordability**
    - Particularly effective for discussing families in housing need, underscoring the affordability crisis.
20. **People working toward securing housing**
    - This empowering phrase emphasizes that housing insecurity is often an active struggle, not a passive condition.

It's time to move toward Strengthening Community Bonds and Supportive Networks.

- Emphasize the importance of building stronger, more inclusive communities that provide support for everyone, especially those facing housing instability. This could involve programs that foster connections, such as mentorship initiatives, community resource centers, or peer support groups.
- Suggest the importance of public policies and programs that foster connection, such as affordable housing communities that build in social services or initiatives that connect people to mental health and addiction resources.

Discrimination against "homeless or homelessness" people

"It is categorized as the act of treating people who lack housing in a prejudiced or negative manner due to the fact that they are homeless. Other factors can compound discrimination against homeless people including discrimination on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, age, mental illness, and other considerations.

Discrimination in the forms of social ostracization, institutional prejudice, and punitive legislation impacts homeless individuals, leaving well documented negative affects such as reducing reported rates of well-being, fracturing perceived social support, decreasing access to goods and services, increasing substance abuse, and prolonging the duration of homelessness."

Language That Reflects Community and Connection

- Conclude with the importance of language that emphasizes belonging and community, such as "neighbors in need" or "community members experiencing housing challenges." This helps shift perspectives from "those people" to "our community," fostering a mindset that everyone deserves support and belonging.

This approach can help people to understand how isolation contributes to housing insecurity and ultimately, how building inclusive, compassionate communities is an essential part of the solution.

Why we should

When it comes to the mentally challenged, this is a good article.https://www.nlc.org/article/2024/05/28/exploring-the-link-between-housing-stability-and-mental-health/

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AmericanBar.org says, Negative beliefs, attitudes, and practices toward unhoused people like Katrina are as toxic and destructive as racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. Yet, they are often difficult to challenge under current law, which does not recognize housing status as a category that is protected from discrimination. And these beliefs and practices are spreading as local governments learn from one another.

But the effects of this harassment extend far beyond the direct harm inflicted on houseless people, horrifying as it is. First, treating the survivors of this broken system as if they are the problem is bad public policy. Criminalization, on its face, is designed to deter houselessness.

However, people are unhoused because they do not have access to housing they can afford—not because they are making a poor life choice. Criminalizing houselessness misdiagnoses the problem and, in doing so, diverts public resources away from real solutions

ABA Service Center Hotline

Phone: (800) 285-2221
International: +1(312) 988-5000
Email: Service@americanbar.org

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The problem with the “homelessness” label

Words are powerful, and they have a particular power when it comes to public policy. As we talk about problems we face in our communities and propose solutions, we have a responsibility to use words precisely and responsibly to describe our world as it is. https://wvea.org/mitch-carmichael-problem-homelessness-label/

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Understanding how “homelessness” effects your Identity

https://www.listeninghouse.org/news/pjlczsihuxs5zhl7xxuxvxt1jj8b8g

From “the homeless” to “people without homes,” a new style manual recommendation could transform how Americans view the crisis.

https://archive.curbed.com/2020/6/11/21273455/homeless-people-definition-copy-editing

“Do not use the collective noun ‘the homeless,’ just like we don’t use ‘the elderly’ or ‘the disabled,’” said Paula Froke, editor of the *AP Stylebook,* in a session announcing changes to AP style.

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Language guides, like those from the Associated Press, for instance, also suggest switching to person-first language altogether (like ‘person experiencing homelessness’), instead of defining someone by their living situation. https://www.goodgoodgood.co/articles/correct-term-for-homeless

In many cases, the use of the term ‘homeless’ carries baggage that brings with it connotations of personal failings, drug use, and other stigmatizing assumptions. When people reference “the homeless.”

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How We Talk About Homelessness: Why Language Matters

Terminology referring to people living without permanent housing changes frequently.

Changing the language can help shed longstanding stigmas and encourage people to view marginalized groups with more empathy. https://www.planetizen.com/blogs/117634-how-we-talk-about-homelessness-why-language-matters

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Endorsements / Final thoughts:

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