What’s In? What’s Out?
Changes in Disability Language

Leadership Development Training
November 23, 2021
Words With Changed Meaning
Evolution of Disability Language

- A Disability Diagnosis
  - Medical diagnosis
- Results in a label
  - Double-edged sword
  - Negative implications
- Neutral words
  - Have evolved to slurs
Person-First Language

• Emphasizes the person first and then the disability
• Disability is an accessory versus an identify – what the person has rather than who the person is
Identify-First Language

- Emphasizes the disability first and then the person
- Disability is an identifier versus an accessory – who the person is versus what the person has
- Most often used in Deaf, Blind, and Autistic communities
Person-First v. Identity-First Language
“Special Needs”

What about the term “special needs?”

Ordinary Needs Video

New York Times Article
Do Our Words Really Matter?
Why Disability Words Matter

• Perceptions and attitudes reside in our heads.
• What’s in our heads come out of our mouths.
• What comes out of our mouths reflects what we believe.
• What we believe drives our behavior (how we treat people).
Language Considerations

• Getting rid of words that:
  – Presume incompetence (idiot, moron, imbecile)
  – Suggest inferiority (“them” or “those people” that suggests they are second-class citizens and leads to marginalization)
  – Evoke pity (victim, tragedy)
  – Create invisible barriers (suffers from, confined to)

• Using words that show dignity and respect
• Using words that promote equality
Who Decides?

Person-Preferred Language

Community-First Language

Conscious Language