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Division of Mental Health

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IDHS/DMH Policy Statement on Language Supporting Personhood of Individuals with Mental Health Conditions

According to research, labels have the potential to promote bias, devalue others and express negative attitudes. Attentional and attitudinal biases can be acquired through the frequent use of certain words. Person-first language has been offered as a mechanism to separate the identity of an individual from any clinical diagnosis, disability, or chronic condition. (*The Power of Language and Labels*, Journal of Counseling & Development, 2016)

Person-first language was adopted by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006, and in 2010 by the American Psychological Association, in order “to maintain integrity (worth) of all individuals as human beings.”

However, more than 20 years after the original recommendations for the use of person-first language for describing people with mental illnesses were published in the 4th edition of the American Psychological Association Publication Manual (1994), there is no consistent use of this language. This is largely due to the perceived need to identify those with mental health conditions differently from others.

The IDHS/Division of Mental Health has been working tirelessly to fight this battle for nearly 20 years. Our efforts have been focused on teaching people to recognize individuals as people, first and foremost; not their diagnoses; not their status as current or former consumers of mental health services; not as problems or cases.

One of the primary ways in which we recognize individuals as people first is in the language we use, both verbally and in writing. Therefore, it is the policy position of the IDHS/DMH, the State Mental Health Authority, that recovery-oriented language will be used in all written documents issued by and/or authorized by the IDHS/DMH. In addition, it is the expectation that all IDHS/DMH staff will utilize recovery oriented language when speaking in any capacity related to their IDHS/DMH employment.

Additionally, to reduce the risk of future discrimination in the job market, it is the recommendation of the IDHS/DMH that organizations who have positions uniquely designed for individuals who have lived experience in mental health and/or addictions recovery modify job titles to focus on the work performed rather than on the life status of the person. Specifically, IDHS/DMH does not endorse the use of the words “peer” or “consumer” in job titles.

The following well-designed tools are offered as resources for those seeking to better understand and utilize recovery-oriented language.

Clinical Support Tool – Guide to Appropriate Language in Mental Health Services

https://www.mhrt.qld.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/guide-to-Appropriate-Language-policy_1.pdf

Recovery-Oriented Language Guide

<http://mob.mhcc.org.au/media/5902/mhcc-recovery-oriented-language-guide-final-web.pdf>