



**New York State Department of Health AIDS Institute  
Recommendations for Improving Language and Establishing Stigma-Free,  
Supportive, Service Delivery Environments  
January, 2018**

- **Use person-first language:** Use phrases such as “person living with HIV” or “person who uses drugs” and avoid using phrases such as “person infected with HIV”, “carrier”, “addict”, “positives”, “injection drug user” or “IDU”.
- **Use identity-affirming language on public facing documents, websites, etc.:** Engage consumer advisory boards or focus groups to help shape language used on the agency website, consumer education documents, social media posts and other public communications. Based on this input, use identity-affirming language. For example, refer to men who identify as gay as such, rather than using the term MSM. Be sensitive to guidance from people of transgender experience and people who are gender non-conforming regarding use of gender-based pronouns.
- **Establish a welcoming environment:** Prominently display “Safe Space” posters and ensure that other posters and artwork displayed is inclusive of all communities served. Since front desk and security staff are often the first people to interact with individuals served, ensure that there are policies and training in place to prepare these important members of the team to demonstrate the agency’s commitment to providing stigma-free services. Ensure that the physical environment of your agency is perceived as safe, supportive and welcoming to all individuals served.
- **Recognize the value of staff being representative of the communities served, including people who are living with HIV:** Ensuring that agency staff are representative of the communities being served is a long-standing value of the AIDS Institute and an important step in promoting stigma-free services.
- **Provide staff training and address stigma during new staff orientation and supervision:** All staff, regardless of their positions, should be provided training on cultural competency and providing stigma-free, affirming services. It is important that all staff be trained on agency expectations, policies and procedures for addressing stigma, including prompt training for new hires. Staff performance around provision of stigma-free services should be addressed as part of staff supervision/ performance evaluation.
- **Build staff skills to dialogue with clients/patients about language:** There is no one-size-fits-all approach to communicating with individuals served in an affirming manner. Language evolves with culture, and people are individuals with distinct feelings and preferences. Staff should be trained on the communication skills needed to: 1) ask individuals served about their preferences regarding language, including acceptable pronouns, 2) demonstrate openness to hearing feedback about these preferences, and 3) adopt verbal and nonverbal communication in a manner that is affirming to each individual client.

- **Be on the alert for judgmental language:** Referring to substance use treatment as “getting clean” implies that using substances is somehow “dirty”. Using terms such as “infectious” also promotes stigma. Attention to the impact of language will bring awareness to words and phrases that promote stigma. Evaluate and assess alternative words and phrases that will serve to create a more affirming environment.
- **Establish policies and procedures to provide services to individuals in their preferred language:** Agencies should establish and follow a Language Access Plan (LAP) to address the language needs of the individuals being served. The LAP should address all legal requirements that your agency may be subject to, based on agency type, affiliation and services delivered.
- **Be prepared to address the needs of people with disabilities:** Agencies should be prepared to meet their responsibilities under the Americans With Disabilities Act. Based on agency type, size and other factors, this may include providing wheelchair access, American Sign Language Interpreters, auxiliary aids and other accommodations to ensure reasonable access for all to the full range of agency services.
- **Use quality improvement to dismantle stigma:** Conduct quality improvement activities that engage people from all levels of the organization to improve how your agency demonstrates to individuals that it provides stigma-free, affirming services.
- **Promote ongoing discussions regarding stigma:** Engage staff, consumers, board members and community members in ongoing discussions about providing stigma-free services. Discussions can focus on how to identify stigma, how to be an effective ally, and how well the agency is meeting its goal of providing stigma-free services.
- **Document agency policies, practices and progress toward eliminating stigma:** Steps to address stigma should be included in the agency’s formal policies and procedures. This is critical to ensuring agency-wide acceptance and full-scale implementation of these efforts. Documenting agency policies and tracking progress toward eliminating stigma will help ensure accountability over time, even if there are changes in agency staff, managers or leadership.