



Community Collaboration A Vibrant & Accessible Crisis System
Police/First Responder Training Behavioral Health Staff Training Family/Consumer/Advocate Participation

An important message from CIT International

Regarding use of appropriate language when we refer to people affected by mental illness

Language awareness when we speak and write about individuals with mental illnesses is profoundly important. We should not tolerate use of mental illness labels and insults that dehumanize people. Research indicates that how we refer to people affects how we treat people. This past week, derogatory terms involving “paranoid schizophrenic” were used by a public figure to insult an individual’s character. We know that schizophrenia is not a character issue and that such use of language only perpetuates the harm that stigma causes. Thus, we must call out such uses of language as inaccurate, offensive, and harmful and become more aware of our own use of language. Additionally, CIT International supports the use of person first language when referring to people affected by mental illness.

The Importance of Person First Language

CIT International is committed to supporting and respecting the human dignity of all people. We recognize that the language used to refer to individuals with mental illnesses, as well as other illnesses, disorders, conditions or disabilities has the potential to promote bias and demean, or alternatively convey respect and recognition of one’s humanity. In order to convey the latter, CIT International recommends the use of person first language when referring to individuals experiencing mental health crises and or living with mental illnesses. Person first language conveys the message that an individual’s total identity is not his or her illness label, rather, he or she is a full person that happens to have the experience of mental illness.

While there are varied opinions on specific terminology (person with mental illness, person with lived experience of mental illness), there is research that suggests that *putting the person before*

the label does shape how individuals are viewed. A recent study conducted by Granello and Gibbs (2016) asked undergraduate students, community members and professional counselors to complete a measure of tolerance that varied whether they were asked about “the mentally ill” or “people with mental illnesses.” Participants that completed the “the mentally ill” version showed lower levels of tolerance than those completing the “people with mental illness” version, with