



WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

Governor Tony Evers / Secretary Kevin A. Carr

Message from DOC Secretary Kevin Carr

The Importance of Person First Language

All,

As I reflect on my past 20 months leading the Department of Corrections, I find myself continuing to explore the role of incarceration in the criminal justice system, and how the DOC can use evidence-based practices to lower recidivism and create stronger, safer communities. Those reflections often bring me back to our agency's core values, like treating all people with dignity and respect.

Our agency uses the National Institute of Corrections' (NIC) eight Evidence-Based Principles for Effective Intervention to guide and inform our work. The NIC's research shows us what works in regards to decreasing recidivism, increasing public safety and improving institutional safety. The principles include focusing on strengths and using positive reinforcement with those in our custody. Our daily interactions with persons in our care can have a big impact on motivational levels, and the reverse can also be true. We can do harm through our interactions when they are not aligned with evidenced-based practices.

That's why I use person first language to eliminate generalizations, assumptions and stereotypes. I use the term "persons in our care" when I talk about adults in our custody, "youth" for those within the Division of Juvenile Corrections and "clients" for those under supervision. I do this because I believe we have a moral obligation to humanize the persons we are working with. Human beings are fallible, and understanding and recognizing this will help the DOC's efforts to set persons in our care on a better path.

While our agency has not made these terms mandatory, it is my preference staff use person first language whenever possible. I've been delighted to hear more and more of our staff using these terms in our everyday conversations, reports and presentations. The bottom line is person first language most accurately reflects our values, and conveys dignity and humanity to those in our care. From this, we can use evidenced-based principals to find each persons' strengths and motivate change.