

Testimony on HB 281 on Importance of People First Language  
To Senate Health Committee Tuesday, 02/09/22  
Dr. Larry Johnson, Ph.D.  
Dean & Professor  
College of Education, Criminal Justice, Human Services, and Information Technology  
University of Cincinnati

Distinguished Members of the Ohio Senate Health Committee:

It is an honor to be able to provide testimony on using Person First language in any legislation or reference to people with disabilities and to discuss the use of the term *handicapped* when referring to accessible amenities like parking and restrooms. These are very important topics and I applaud the legislature for working to get this verbiage correct because words are important, and they can encourage equality or reinforce stereotypes. I will first address the importance of Person First language, followed by a brief discussion of the how the term *handicapped* evolved to refer to an individual with a disability, and finally what are proper terms to use now.

Person First language simply means that you lead with person instead of the disability. Instead of describing someone as disabled, you describe them as a person with a disability. The underlying philosophy of Person First language is that we all are people and if there is any kind of disability, we should first recognize the dignity of the person and only add the fact that person has the disability if doing so adds clarity or understanding. For example, I now have a physical disability, in most cases, just referring to me as Larry is enough – it is only in a rare case that knowing the fact that I have a disability adds clarification as in this example: “Larry has a physical disability so he needs accessible parking.”

Person First language is the most respectful way to refer to individuals with a disability because it embraces the dignity and equality of the individuals and makes the fact that they have a disability secondary. Moreover, it is important to note that at times all of us have a disability. As we grow older this becomes incredibly clear.

As I indicated above, words matter, and I applaud efforts to move away from terms like *handicap* or *handicapped*. If you look at the history of these words, it is only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that they came to be associated with an individual with a disability. Folklore indicates that the word *handicapped* had its origins from an edict in 1504 by King Henry VII of England because of a war where many of his soldiers became disabled from their war wounds. He believed these individuals were incapable of working so he proclaimed that begging in the streets be legal for these individuals; with their “cap in hand” they begged for money. Most historians do not support this origin; however, such folklore contributes to the negative connotation of the term *handicapped*.

The actual origin of this word seems to have come from a medieval bartering approach called “hand in cap” where a referee would require one of the bartering members to put coins in his cap to make the deal fairer. This is where the concept of handicapping sports came from where odd’s makers give the inferior opponent an advantage so they can compete. Who does not look at the spread (points given to a team) before watching your favorite football team in the fall? Because a team or an athlete is considered inferior, they are given an extra advantage to compensate for

their short comings. People with disabilities are not inferior and making something accessible is not an extra advantage, rather it is an appropriate support that can ameliorate a person's challenge or disability, just like wearing glasses is, or having an elevator to help us get to the top of a multistory building.

As personnel example of having appropriate supports, I received remedial services when I was in grade school because I had difficulty reading and writing. I still can't read out loud without a lot of errors. My comprehension is good when I read silently, I just don't read all the words. I also can't read or write cursive very well, which was a serious problem when I was in grade school. Now I print everything and I can decode most cursive notes but sometimes I ask someone what they think this or that sentence says to help me. Because everyone's hand writing is so poor I get away with it. Later computers became common place and with the support and structure provided by the keyboard in combination with spell checker programs my problems became trivial. I have since published 14 books and countless articles – my mind wasn't and isn't inferior I just needed the appropriate support to overcome my challenges that seemed insurmountable when I was in grade school.

Moreover, referring to accessible amenities like parking and restrooms as *handicapped* is inaccurate and inappropriate. They should be called accessible parking, accessible restrooms, etc. These spaces or restroom stalls do not have a challenge or a disability; they are merely making things more accessible to those that may need these kinds of supports. As another example, my wife is in her mid-sixties and has had two knee operations and it hurts her to walk long distances. She refuses to park in a spot labeled *handicapped* because as she tells me she does not want to think of herself as handicapped.

In closing, I am truly honored to have the opportunity to testify on this important topic because words are important and they can encourage equality or reinforce stereotypes. We all have or will have challenges that can be called a disability. Person First language places the integrity and dignity of the person first and places the disability as a secondary characteristic of the person, in fact, only one of many factors that make up a person. Moving away from terms like *handicapped* is also important because the term has taken on negative connotations and reinforces that things like accessible parking are a special advantage given to an inferior person rather than a reasonable and needed accommodation. Always remember we all rely on help to overcome challenges, and at some point, we will all have a challenge that could be called a disability. Our focus should always be on abilities and the individual's dignity.

Respectfully,

Dr. Larry Johnson, Dean & Professor  
College of Education, Criminal Justice, Human Services, and Information Technology