

CO SOMB changes 'sex offender' to 'adults who commit sex offenses,' but not without dissent

written by Sandy | November 20, 2021

CHANGES TO LABELS FOR SEX OFFENDERS

Approved in 10-6 vote

No changes in criminal justice system or sex offender

Label has "negative impact" during treatment

By Sandy . . . The Colorado Sex Offender Management Board [has taken a bold move](#). After barely having sufficient margin in a vote taken earlier this year to even consider the issue, they passed a motion in a November 19th meeting to replace the term "sex offender" with "adults who commit sexual offenses."

While this change is binding only to the Management Board and the treatment programs it oversees, it is, as far as we are aware, the first formalization of what has come to be known as person-first language into its vocabulary and usage.

Person-first language does away with labels. It recognizes that, while the person committed an offense – or at least was convicted of an offense – he or she is still a person and that people can and should change and move beyond their pasts.

The change in terminology is not without its detractors, of course. The board itself was not in agreement, with the vote being 10 – 6. [At least one media outlet](#) could not overcome its bias against the move, letting it seep into its reporting with the denigrating phrase, “. . . so-called ‘person-first’ language.”

Prosecutors, former victims, and victim advocate groups were the most vocally opposed, and their expressed opposition is shown in the statements that the new terminology isn’t “victim-centered” and that “victims live with their label for life.” This exemplifies exactly why this move is so urgently needed.

This practice of creating life-long victims, of creating a class of permanent victim-hood, is as dangerous and debilitating as is creating the class of permanent offenders. Neither allows those involved in the criminal act, whether as perpetrator or victim, to move beyond that status and establish a healthy lifestyle that offers any personal satisfaction or contribution to society.

Virtually all opposition is centered around the implied but erroneous belief that those who commit sexual crime are beyond redemption, cannot be rehabilitated, will reoffend if given the opportunity, and deserve to be punished for a lifetime. The very existence of a public sexual offense register assures that this belief is perpetuated and disseminated.

This change in terminology is a tiny response to what a vast body of research shows about those who have sexually offended: Virtually everything done in common and legal practice, from the registry and all that it has spawned to putting labels on people, prevent former offenders from being seen as people capable of change, inhibit self-worth, impede rehabilitation, and work to the detriment of society as a whole rather than the betterment.

Anything that can be done to start removing that stigma is a step toward allowing those who bear this label and have changed or want to change to do so.

What could be more victim-centered than that?