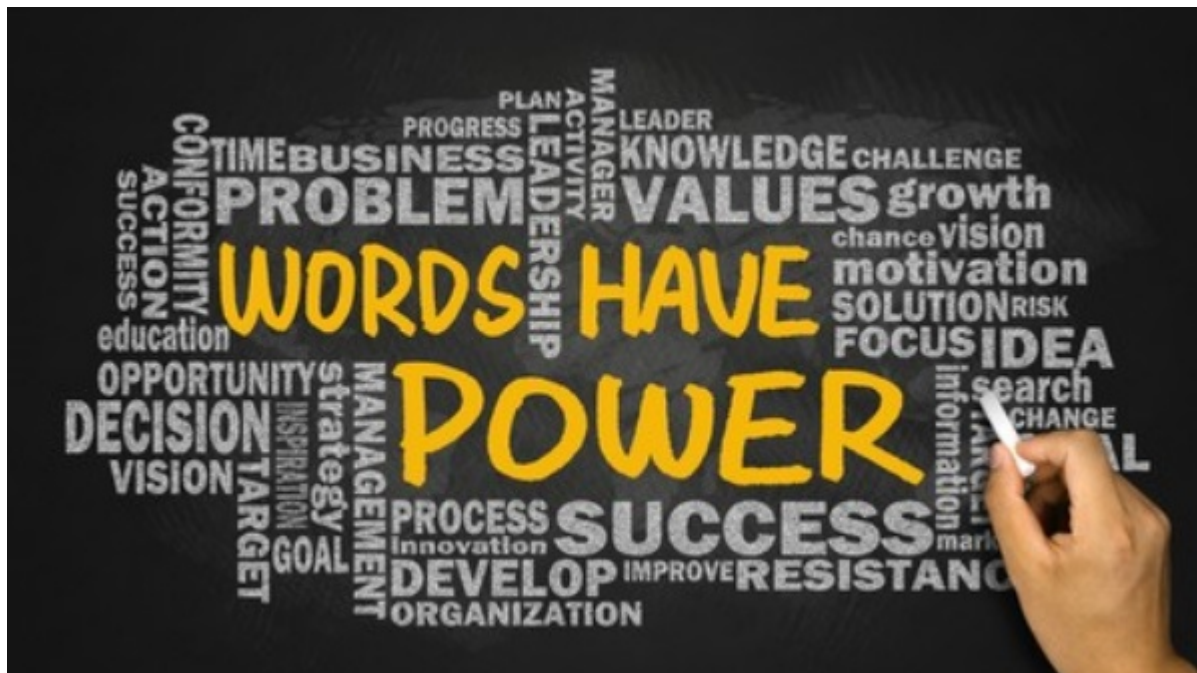


Why Person-First Language?

written by Sandy | December 15, 2021



By Sandy . . . The Colorado Sex Offender Management Board has instituted a policy that will replace the words “sex offender” when referring to their clients with “adults who commit sexual offenses.” This has met with a negative reaction from many. The editorial board of the *Denver Gazette* exhibits this negativity in an [extremely well written and persuasive piece](#) about why person-first language puts victims last.

In spite of the mocking tone used toward the subject matter, person-first language has value. It does away with the [long-known dangerous practice](#) of labeling people, and especially labeling them with what we don’t want them to be. 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 and do change and move beyond their pasts.

Person-first language recognizes that people are not their crimes, but rather that people commit crimes. And above all, it gives those who have committed crimes, are repentant, and have changed or want to change a way of looking at and feeling

about themselves that is correlated with a [reduction in criminal behavior](#).

The major criticism of this change appears to be that it is not “victim-centered” and will further “put victims last.”

Rather than victims being put last in the existing process, they are heard and zealously defended by state prosecuting attorneys as well as victims’ advocates and are allowed to speak at sentencing and encouraged to submit written impact statements to the court.

That said, it was never the intention of the criminal justice system that prosecuting attorneys represent the victims; instead, they speak for and represent the state and the entirety of its citizens.

Contrary to misinformation that those with sexual convictions offend “over and over,” [studies done for several decades](#) show consistently that the vast majority do not reoffend. Would not the citizens of the state, including past and future victims, benefit if, rather than continuing with “umbrella” practices and policies that treat everyone the same, resources were directed toward identification, treatment, and management of those few who more likely will reoffend?

Another major concern expressed is that this “trend” of person-first language may influence other entities and actually effect a change in public policy.

Let us hope so.

The current policies and procedures, in spite of every rehabilitation and reentry initiative conceived, are designed to keep those who have prior sexual convictions **from** rehabilitation and reentry.

It is difficult to imagine anything more destructive to successful reentry than a public sexual offense registry and

all that it has spawned. In spite of this system being shown [totally ineffective in improving public safety](#) in a vast body of evidence, it persists.

It persists because it is what the people want, and the people want it because the image of **all** those with prior sexual crime convictions is overlaid with so much negativity and assumption of sure, future danger that little else could be thought. And calling them sex offenders – present tense – is the groundwork upon which all of this is laid.

The registry as we know it today was designed in the wake of a few, horrific situations where children were abducted and murdered. The similarity between the perpetrators of those crimes and the nearly million who are listed on sexual offense registries today is non-existent, yet the consequences are not only the same but have worsened through the years.

The fact is, virtually everybody convicted of a sexual crime and given a prison sentence will be returning to society at a future date. We must ask ourselves how we want them returned. Do we want them returned thinking themselves worthless and incapable of change? Do we want them believing that they are indeed “sex offenders” and criminals and might as well behave as such?

Or do we want them seeing a deserving future in a law-abiding society because they are people who have committed crimes, some of them bad crimes, but crimes for which they have paid according to their sentencing?

“Victim-centeredness” is a term which appears to be synonymous with perpetual vengeance and perpetual punishment.

Neither of those is consistent with our justice system, and they certainly are not consistent with what maximizes the initiatives for improved public safety for all, which puts victims not last, but first.