WORDS MATTER

WE ARE MORE THAN A LABEL

humanizing versus stigmatizing language
WHAT IS THIS ZINE ABOUT?

Words shape and are shaped by our lives, experiences and imaginations. They have the power to heal, grow connection and liberation, and reduce stigma. They also have the power to relegate and reinforce myths and stereotypes.

Words and word choice have a true human-impact.

This zine is an invitation to use humanizing - person-first - language when communicating about community members with justice histories. It is an opportunity to expand our community practice of choosing words that honor each other’s full humanity.

Please share this resource with others!

Open conversations and listening help to make sure we are engaging in respecting people’s identities. While this zine offers suggested language, please always defer to what an individual asks to be called.

WHO ARE WE?

This zine was proudly created by community members of The Fortune Society in collaboration with designer Laura Cerón Melo. We believe in the healing and transformative powers of imagination, creativity and radical hope. This publication and the sentiments herein are rooted in the vision and wisdom of Eddie Ellis and The Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions. We offer gratitude to all advocates whose lives have intersected with the (in)justice system that work tirelessly for our collective futures.

The Fortune Society’s mission is to support successful reentry from incarceration and promote alternatives to incarceration, thus strengthening the fabric of our communities.
WHY WORDS MATTER

Today, there are over two million people incarcerated in the United States’ jail and prison system.

People with justice histories are referred to in an array of dehumanizing labels, such as “inmates,” “criminals,” “prisoners,” “convicts,” “delinquents,” “felons,” and “offenders.”

Even after people complete their sentence of incarceration and return to the community, oftentimes these labels follow.

Terms like “ex-inmates,” “ex-prisoners,” “ex-convicts,” “ex-felons,” and “ex-offenders” are used to categorize and stigmatize people affected by the criminal justice system.

We encourage you to use humanizing language—your example will inspire others.

Dehumanizing labels stereotype and marginalize people rather than support them while they rebuild their lives. Individuals with justice system involvement are not defined by their conviction history.

The words we use to reference people should reflect their full identities, and acknowledge their capacity to change and grow.
NO

STIGMATIZING & DEHUMANIZING

Offender
Inmate
Felon
Criminal
Convict
Prisoner
Ex-offender
Ex-con
Ex-prisoner
Parolee
Probationer
Detainee
Juvenile
Offender
Juvenile
Delinquent
Sex Offender
Mentally Ill
Homeless
Infected with HIV/AIDS
Addict
Substance Abuser

YES

HUMANIZING

with justice system involvement
impacted by the justice system
previously incarcerated

PERSON or INDIVIDUAL

with justice history
currently under parole supervision
on probation
in detention
with sex offense conviction(s)

young person with justice system involvement
with mental health needs
in need of/currently receiving mental health services
currently or previously experiencing homelessness
living with HIV
with a history of substance use

LANGUAGE
I WANT YOU TO SEE ME
I'M A RESPONSIBLE GUY THAT ONE DAY WILL BE A SUPERSTAR
I'M A FLASHING LIGHT
I'M NOT A LABEL I'M A HUMAN BEING
WORDS DON'T DEFINE MY HUMANITY
I AM HERE. I AM PRESENT. I AM.
I am a caring person
I am a smart individual caught up in trouble trying to change my life and make my family proud
I am a taxpaying, hard worker, loyal mets & knicks fan, brother, son, good man
I am extremely gifted
I am humble
I am Ryan, I'm bluestone. I'm a part of the blues and the tones it creates. I'm part of the stone, as blue as it is.
I AM PASSIONATE ABOUT IMPROVING DAY BY DAY
I AM A GIANT
I am a cisgendered male, lover of dreamer,
love, social worker, writer, a port in a storm
I am very important and gifted
I am a boy
I am your neighbor
I am a woman, mother, student, creative, open minded
call me by MY NAME
ALLOW ME TO LIVE A NORMAL LIFE
SAVING ONE LIFE
being a leader for the children I never had
being able to make
be successful and healthy
have my own
nonprofit and help others

BY SHARING MINE
MORE LOVE IN THE WORLD
dreams come true
better communication between people
and my kid's children
being able to see my kids grow,

Joy
taking care of
my family
opening a juice bar
for a better
environment

To paraphrase another dreamer, I dream of being judged by the content of my character rather than by the color of my skin

Peace
winning the lottery

more smiles

MORE

LEAVE DREAMS

Freedom, breaking walls that keep us separated, away from happiness

becoming a counselor
becoming a superstar
being respected
getting Wall Street small enough to drown in a bathtub

having a sports car

having a better tomorrow

being financially stable

seeing the Mets and Knicks win

one day becoming a terrific writer

one day becoming a terrific writer

peace
winning the lottery

becoming a minister

a lot of personal growth

a free America
CONTRIBUTORS

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Helen Taylor is a poet and proud Fortune Society community member. Love is love.

The Great Mr. West I am very interested in progressing every day.

Rafael Zarzuela Optimistic, believes that there is good in this world.

Marquis Wade I am a strong believer in hard work and dedication!

Felix Guzmán is a poet and organizer committed towards building healthier communities inclusive of all. IG & Twitter: @felixguzman81

Blustone is a poet and photographer. He loves exploring nature and spirituality. IG: @Signed.x.blustone

Becky Jane Dunham is a lifelong student of Mother Earth and is now learning how to grow with words.

Roslyn Svendsen I'm beautiful. I'm kind. I'm gorgeous. I'm love. I'm happy.

Néstor “Panama” Eversley is a poet and proud Fortune Society community member.

Hilton N. Webb, Jr., is a formerly incarcerated cis-gendered man who loves the speed and danger of Harley Davidson motorcycles, the smell of fragrant blossoms, and the laughter of small happy children. He is also a writer who believes poems are the sharpest arrows in literature and that love is the strongest force in the universe. Twitter: @Bear_Claw @BearClaw27494242

Deacon Ireal K. Jacobs A poet from Brooklyn, NY. After years of being in and out of incarceration and realizing that he was headed for no man’s land, he made the conscious decision to become a deacon, and to serve the Lord with all his heart and soul.

Jose Martinez I am interested in learning new things every day in work and education. I also love working with animals. My goal in high school was to be a veterinarian.

Nysaiah Marrero I like to work hard towards my goals, dream and to be financially set. All you need is ______.

Jamie Maleszka Believer in radical love. Director of Creative Arts at The Fortune Society

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Erobos Abzu Lamashu, OKA, “E” is an extraterrestrial, extra-dimensional being imprisoned in human form for reasons that remain unclear. "Middle aged" according to the lifespan of earthlings, formerly imprisoned in several penal colonies throughout The State of New York: "Excelsior!" For the majority of His existence, He was referred to as an "illegal alien." The consensus has currently settled on "undocumented immigrant." An unwanted stranger by any other name is still...He resides at the bohect and upon the auspices of The Fortune Society. IG: @eroboslamashu Twitter: @ErobosAbzuLamas
Thank you to the participating community members for sharing their light.

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Thank you to Fortune staff, volunteers and community partners for their work each and every day.

Thank you, reader.
I AM.