



The Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions
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“When there is emotional pain, psychiatrists like me believe that we can help. But before we act we need to find some handle for the problem, some name to guide action. Once in awhile, we realize that these names are inadequate for the problems we are seeing. Then we search for new names, or new ways to group old names.”

-- Mindy Thompson Fullilove, M.D., “Root Shock,” 2005

An Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language

Dear Friends:

The Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions is an activist academic center, public policy think tank and community organizer at Medgar Evers College in the City University of New York. The Center was founded and is directed and staffed by people who were formerly incarcerated. It is the first and only one of its kind in the United States.

*One of our first initiatives is to respond to the negative public perception about our population as expressed in the language and concepts used to describe us. When we are not called mad dogs, animals, predators, offenders and other derogatory terms, we are referred to as inmates, convicts, prisoners and felons. All terms devoid of humanness which identify us as “things” rather than as people. These terms are accepted as the “official” language of the media, law enforcement, the prison industrial complex and public policy agencies. **However, they are no longer acceptable for us and we are asking people to stop using them.***

In an effort to assist our transition from prison to our communities as responsible citizens and to create a more positive human image of ourselves, we are asking everyone to stop using these negative terms and to simply refer to us as **PEOPLE**. People currently or formerly incarcerated, **PEOPLE** on parole, **PEOPLE** recently released from prison, **PEOPLE** in prison, **PEOPLE** with criminal convictions, but **PEOPLE**.

We habitually underestimate the power of language. The bible says, “**Death and life are in the power of the tongue.**” In fact, all of the faith traditions recognize the power of words and, in particular, names that we are given or give ourselves. Ancient traditions considered the “naming ceremony” one of the most important rites of passage. Your name indicated not only who you were and where you belonged, but also who you could be. The worst part of repeatedly hearing your negative definition of me, is that I begin to believe it myself “*for as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.*” It follows then, that calling me inmate, convict, prisoner, felon, or offender indicates a lack of understanding of who I am, but more importantly **what I can be.** I can be and am much more than an “ex-con,” or an “ex-offender,” or an “ex-felon.”

The Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions believes that if we can get progressive publications, organizations and individuals like you to stop from using the old offensive language and simply refer to us as “**people**,” we will have achieved a significant step forward in our life giving struggle to be recognized as the human beings we are. We have made our mistakes, yes, but we have also paid or are paying our debts to society.

We believe we have the right to be called by a name we choose, rather than one someone else decides to use. We think that by insisting on being called “**people**” we reaffirm our right to be recognized as human beings, not animals, inmates, prisoners or offenders.

We also firmly believe that if we cannot persuade you to refer to us, and think of us, as people, then all our other efforts at reform and change are seriously compromised.

Accordingly, please talk with your friends and colleagues about this initiative. If you agree with our approach encourage others to join us. Use positive language in your writing, speeches, publications, web sites and literature.

When you hear people using the negative language, gently and respectfully correct them and explain why such language is hurting us. Kindly circulate this letter on your various list serves.

If you disagree with this initiative, please write and tell us why at the above address or e-mail us at ellis@mec.cuny.edu. Perhaps, we have overlooked something.

Please join us in making this campaign successful. With your help we can change public opinion, one person at a time. Thank you so much.

In Solidarity and Love,

Eddie Ellis
Executive Director