

To: All Providers
From: PerformCare
Date: July 9, 2024
Subject: 2024 DEI Provider Memo Series: Words Matter

PerformCare's July 2024 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Provider Memo focuses on how words matter.

WORDS MATTER

Words are powerful. The language and terminology we choose when speaking about people reflects our attitudes and beliefs and has an impact on the treatment and care we provide. Often when discussing disparities, we find information that focuses on groups as passive rather than active participants in the dynamics that shape their interaction with health care systems. Words like 'marginalized,' 'disenfranchised' or 'disproportionate' are used to describe how medical systems have treated these groups. While those dynamics deserve to be analyzed and addressed, we must be careful not to overshadow the ways these groups have shaped health care through advocacy and engagement.



One group that has often been represented in the media unfavorably has been individuals who identify as LGBTQ+. However, on a more positive note, in response to the prevalence of mental health concerns the LGBTQIA+ community has:

- Brought forth organizations that address the unique mental health concerns for people who are LGBTQIA+.
- Developed prevention, outreach, and advocacy (e.g., expansion in use of health care proxy, improved policies to study and prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS)
- Ensured resources are accessible by phone, chat, and text.

- Developed support groups and safe spaces.

These innovative strategies ensure there are multiple paths to getting help. Media and Public Policy discussions regarding people who are LGBTQIA+ and have Substance Use Disorders often demonstrate negative themes referencing words such as “risk”, “victimization” and “disorders”. However, the findings of a 2021 – 2022 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) Study (<https://www.samhsa.gov/data/report/lgb-behavioral-health-report-2021-2022>) showed that 70 percent of lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults did not have a substance use disorder. When LGBTQIA+ individuals do misuse substances they also seek treatment at higher rates than Straight and Cisgender counterparts despite the stigma and discrimination they may encounter. When accurate representation of individuals is not reflected in our language it can perpetuate themes of stigma and bias.

Looking primarily at disparities overshadows the opportunity to learn about resiliency among people who are LGBTQIA+ that could aid those who may be struggling with a mental health or substance use disorder. In actuality, many individuals identifying as LGBTQIA+ are very resilient. They have had to learn to cope with and overcome a multitude of social and environmental stressors. When language only focused on disparities, the resiliency and contributions of LGBTQIA+ individuals are lost. As we move forward together, let’s continue to ensure our language and word choice reflects a respectful view of all people.

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