

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES ARE PEOPLE FIRST.

Language is of vital importance when speaking to and about people with disabilities. It is vital to keep “people first” meaning you start with the person, not their disability. It is about equal rights, respect and dignity.

The Independent Living (IL) Movement strives to give people with disabilities (PWD) the freedom to determine how they live their life. It promotes access and the ability to live independently in their community. Like other equal rights movements, the Independent Living Movement seeks to bring basic civil rights to all people, regardless of their disability. The Independence Center’s (The IC) work reflects this idea. Our work and processes are consumer driven, meaning we don’t work harder than our consumer. We allow the consumer to determine what independence means to them and work alongside them to achieve their goals.

The IL movement is different from the social services model in that it does not assume the role of “caretaker.” Staff at The IC do not assume to know what is best for our consumers, **they** are the person most knowledgeable about their disability, and it is only working with them as equals voices in the process, that we can enable our consumers to reach their level of independence. PWD are often treated as “less than” those who are non-disabled. Based often on pity and misunderstanding, it breeds a culture that has “taken care of” PWD instead of creating equality that allows them do it for themselves.

When The IC was founded, our motto was, “If it’s to be, it’s up to me.” Founded by PWD, The IC started to bring holistic services to PWD who wish to live independently in the community. We exist to empower PWD to determine what course they want for their lives. Empowerment is the key to bringing independence to PWD.

The language we used is vital when it comes to empowering PWD to live an independent life. In order for the culture of pity and misunderstand to fully be erased, it is up to all of us in our daily interactions to ensure that we are using words that empower our brothers and sisters with a disability. The attitudes of dependence towards PWD are ingrained in our culture. From preconceived notions, to the media, to how everyday conversations, we have been taught to use language that sets PWD apart and creates the mindset that they are to be pitied and need our help.

October is Disabilities Awareness month. As we move into the time of remembering the long history of the disabilities rights movement, we at The IC want to invite you to be part of the effort to bring holistic independence to PWD. Below are some tips and hints for working with people with disabilities.

Did you know that...

- One in five individuals have a disability
- 54 million Americans have disability
- 50% are deaf or hearing impaired
- 15% have psychiatric issues
- 13% have cognitive impairment (includes TBI)
- 6% are blind or have visual impairments
- 2% of people use wheelchairs

When talking to individuals in wheelchairs:

- Be at eye level when talking
- Consider distance
- Avoid leaning on wheelchair
- Always ask before pushing a wheelchair
- Pats on the head are inappropriate

Our Mission: To **empower** persons with disabilities, to **maximize their independence** within the community, and to **remove barriers** which prevent integration and equal opportunity.



The Independence Center | 729 S. Tejon Street, Colorado Springs, CO 80903 | 719 - 471 - 8181

Dixie Herring –Independent Living Director
Courtney Beardslee – Independent Living Program Manager

When talking to individuals with speech impairments:

- Give 100% of your attention
- Be encouraging rather than correcting
- Be patient
- Ask short questions

When talking to individuals with prosthetics:

- Be okay to shake prosthetic or other hand
- Staring is inappropriate
- Don't ask about their disability
- Know that some who have leg prosthetics use wheelchairs

When talking to individuals with psychiatric issues:

- Remain calm
- Be supportive
- Don't make assumptions

When talking to individuals with hearing impairments:

- Get the person's attention
- Share topic
- Speak slower and clearly
- Look directly at person
- Have nothing in front of or in your mouth
- Maintain eye contact
- Use the words "I" when communicating with an interpreter
- Speak to the person, not their interpreter

When talking to individuals with visual impairments:

- Offer your arm
- Identify yourself
- Be specific in giving directions
- Keep doors open or closed
- Place person's hand on back of chair

Please Don't Say:

Differently abled, challenged, the disabled, slow learner, normal able-bodied. Quad, handicapped parking, confined to a wheelchair. Deaf-mute, the hearing impaired. Crazy, mentally ill. Autistic. Mute, Dumb, Birth Defect, Mental Retardation

**Taken from The University of Kansas*

Do Say:

Disability, people with disabilities, person with a learning disability, non-disabled. Person with quadriplegia, accessible parking, uses a wheelchair. Visually Impaired. Deaf, hard of hearing. Behavioral health, mental health issue. Person with autism. Speech disorder, Congenital disability, Intellectual disability

Patricia Yeager was recently named the new CEO at The Independence Center. Patricia has been in the disability rights movement for over thirty years, promoting access to higher education in Pittsburgh and Denver, shaping public policies, as well as developing and implementing services at Independent Living Centers (ILCs) in Denver and San Diego. She has provided organizational consulting to Independent Living Centers and Councils around the country. Yeager earned her M.S. in Rehabilitation from West Virginia University, and a PhD in Human Rehabilitation from the University of Northern Colorado. We are pleased and excited to have Patricia here.