

# POWERFUL words.

There are many issues surrounding homelessness. Sometimes we feel powerless because we do not have the words to mount a strong argument on behalf of people experiencing homelessness. We might also struggle to find the words to describe the issues and crisis people are experiencing.

In the Northern Territory when the public hears the word 'homeless', 'itinerant' or 'long-grasser', their first thoughts might be of anti-social behaviour, drunkenness, begging, domestic violence or crime. The words we use, if not carefully considered, can unintentionally stigmatise a group of vulnerable people who often have no control over their circumstances. This stigmatisation can prevent us from getting our message out or from achieving important outcomes for those we are trying to help. Importantly, it also fails to recognise the individual experiencing homelessness.

Even when we have the best of intentions for calling someone 'homeless', saying we 'feed the homeless', 'provide for the homeless' or are 'fundraising for the homeless', what we are doing is categorising the people we are trying to assist by one thing 'homelessness' and not by their individuality. We are not referring to someone's mother, sister, son experiencing homelessness, we are just referring to 'the homeless'. Everyone is lumped in together, there is no individual. We turn those we are working with into magnets that attract the negative stereotypes attributed to the label 'homeless'. Homeless becomes who they are not what they are experiencing.

As a community that cares about people experiencing homelessness, we need to use our voice to help keep the discussion focused on the issue at hand; lack of housing, lack of funding, lack of support, domestic violence and poor policy.

## **Election Cycle**

Every four years we have a Local Council election, a Territory election and a Federal election. These are opportune times for politicians to appeal for votes and unfortunately this gives rise to the prevalence of ill-considered language that stigmatises those who are experiencing homelessness in our towns and cities. Elections often bring out the worst in public commentators. When communicating with people seeking election, those that care for the vulnerable in our community should take the opportunity to use respectful and considered language as a means of humanising and destigmatising people experiencing homelessness.

## **Suggestions and resources:**

- Instead of "the homeless" try to substitute words like "unhoused", "roofless", "houseless", "having no home" or "people experiencing homelessness".
- Instead of saying 'helping the homeless', 'feeding the homeless' or "caring for the homeless" maybe say "helping those in need" or "supporting vulnerable Territorians".
- Instead of using the word "itinerants" or "long grasser" define why people are in that space. Are they here for health reasons, escaping domestic violence, on a shopping trip, visiting someone in care, here for work or looking for employment? Give context to their experience.

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The following links explain the need for using person centered language and may be useful to share with your colleagues.

## **HOMELESS VS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS: WHY VOCABULARY MATTERS**

<https://www.endeavors.org/community-services-news/homeless-vs-experiencing-homelessness-why-vocabulary-matters/>

## **What's in the name 'homeless'? How people see themselves and the labels we apply matter**

<https://theconversation.com/whats-in-the-name-homeless-how-people-see-themselves-and-the-labels-we-apply-matter-69282>

## **The Stigma of Homelessness: The Impact of the Label 'Homeless' on Attitudes Toward Poor Persons**

<https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/stigma-homelessness-impact-label-homeless-attitudes-toward-poor-persons>

## **How to Use Respectful, Instead of Degrading, Language Around Homelessness**

<https://invisiblepeople.tv/how-to-use-respectful-instead-of-degrading-language-around-homelessness/>

## **Homelessness 101: Person-Centered Language – What is it?**

<https://www.homelesshouston.org/homelessness-101-person-centered-language-what-is-it>

Please also refer to NT Shelter fact sheet: “What can I say?” for short messages, quotes and other facts around homelessness that may help when responding to questions, dispelling myths or educating the public about people who are experiencing homeless in our community.

Lastly words from those who have at times experienced homelessness:

## **To End Homelessness, Start with Stigma**

<https://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/end-homelessness-start-stigma>

## **We Are Here: Stories of Home, Place & Belonging** by Meg Mundell

<https://affirmpress.com.au/publishing/we-are-here/>

“Your words have power. Speak words that are kind, loving, positive, uplifting, encouraging, and life-giving.” – Unknown

“There is power in words. What you say is what you get.” - Zig Ziglar