



## Standard of Practice

Effective Date: August 5, 2015

Approved by: Pat Valentine

### Communication Related to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression:

#### Language, Terminology, and Preferred Names and Gender Pronouns

All individuals have their own preferences for how they identify and describe themselves, which can often change over time. **Staff do not have to understand or agree with someone's sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression to respect and support the individual's right to be and express themselves.** DHS and contracted provider staff are expected to use inclusive, respectful, and gender-neutral language, and to use individuals' preferred names and gender pronouns (ex: he/him/his; she/her/hers; they/their/theirs) as soon as that preference is made known. This applies to both verbal and written communication. Avoid making assumptions about an individual's gender identity. **All staff should make a practice of asking individuals what their preferred name and gender pronouns are and in what situations they want them to be used.**

Since some terms may be acceptable and/or preferable to one person and offensive to another, staff should make every effort to use the language and terminology used by the individual (when appropriate) during one-on-one interactions. Acceptable terminology varies considerably by age, so it is *not* safe to assume that language used by youth is appropriate to use with older adults.

Unless the individual self-identifies as such, staff are **prohibited from using value-laden and outdated terms**, including but not limited to: "homo," "homosexual," "sexual preference," "alternative lifestyle," "tranny," "transvestite," and "sex change."<sup>1</sup>

#### ***Preferred Names and Pronouns***

All individuals served by DHS may request the use of a preferred first name, and the gender with which they identify, that is different than their legal name and/or the gender associated with their sex assigned at birth. Some people are gender fluid and may change their name and/or gender identity on a regular basis. This does not make their identity less valid, and it is important to validate and honor the individual's choice and utilize the name and pronouns they select.

---

<sup>1</sup> Refer to the LGBTQ Communication Tip Sheet for additional guidance.

When an individual requests use of a preferred name and/or gender pronoun, DHS and provider staff will ask which name (legal or preferred) staff should use when they refer to them in conversation with family members or other service providers. Staff must comply with requests regarding preferred name and pronouns at all times. Use of incorrect name or pronoun can result in serious safety threats to individuals who have not disclosed their gender identity to family members or other service providers. Staff will check-in with individuals at each service planning review and/or whenever a new provider becomes involved to see if it is still safe to refer to them by their chosen name and pronouns when conversing with family members or new providers.

While some family members, educators, employers, medical personnel, and even public officials (e.g. court personnel) may intentionally use the birth or legal name, or pronouns associated with the sex assigned at birth (instead of the chosen name and/or pronouns) it is vital for staff to maintain the respectful and affirming relationship with the individual and continue to honor their preferences.

It is important to recognize that even with the best intentions, mistakes and accidents can and will happen. When the worker utilizes the incorrect name and/or pronoun, they should verbally recognize the mistake, apologize, and move forward with the correct name and/or pronoun. It is equally important to be receptive to and accepting of an individual's calling out of these mistakes, and not take a defensive or retaliatory stance.

If a staff member becomes aware of a colleague refusing to use preferred names and/or gender pronouns, or using derogatory or harmful language towards another individual, staff will report the incident to their direct supervisor **OR** to their Human Resources department **OR** to the Director's Action Line. Contracted provider staff should follow the appropriate reporting procedures as determined by their specific organization.

## Related Resources & Documents

### Policy Statements

#### **Allegheny County Department of Human Services**

DHS Anti-Discrimination Policy

<http://info.alleghenycounty.us/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=5675>

#### **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**

Non-Discrimination Policy Statement

<http://www.hhs.gov/asa/eo/nondiscrimination/index.html>

Allegheny County Department of Human Services  
1 Smithfield Street  
Pittsburgh, PA 15222  
412-350-5701  
<http://www.alleghenycounty.us/DHS/index.aspx>

## **LGBTQ Language and Pronoun Guides**

### **Gay Straight Alliance for Safe Schools**

Preferred Gender Pronouns: What the heck is a “PGP”?

<http://www.gsafewi.org/wp-content/uploads/What-the-heck-is-a-PGP1.pdf>

### **GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation)**

An Ally's Guide to Terminology

[http://www.glaad.org/sites/default/files/allys-guide-to-terminology\\_1.pdf](http://www.glaad.org/sites/default/files/allys-guide-to-terminology_1.pdf)

## **Resources**

### **Transgender Legal Defense & Education**

The Name Change Project

[http://www.transgenderlegal.org/work\\_show.php?id=7](http://www.transgenderlegal.org/work_show.php?id=7)

### **Allegheny County Department of Human Services**

Director's Action Line

1-800-862-6783

<http://www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/dal.aspx>