

What's wrong with Mental Retardation?

When Steve Eidelman, executive director for The Arc of the United States, was in Denver recently, he said the controversy over which words would replace “mental retardation” would be solved “ten years after Hell freezes over.”

“Mental Retardation” is a term legislators understand because it’s the term used in legislation. So do members of the public. So do school children who use the term “retard” to cast insults at those who are different.

Most agree that the term “developmentally disabilities” is not much better. In fact depending on which definition of “developmentally disabilities” you use, one person qualifies by one but not the other. But we believe the term is better than “mental retardation.”

Why? Because just like the terms “imbecile,” “idiot,” and “moron” before it, “mental retardation” has moved from a medically accepted and meaningful description to the derogatory, demeaning and disgusting label used by school children.

So what do we replace it with? The Arc of the United States suggests “cognitive, intellectual or developmental disabilities” with the person always first, e.g. a person with cognitive disabilities. In an attempt to help the public replace “mental retardation” with a term more acceptable to those most often labeled with it, The Arc in Jefferson County proposes the following Bridge Statement, conceived by the hard-working advocates and volunteers of The Arc of Arapahoe and Douglas.

Bridge Statement

The Arc in Jefferson County is a membership organization made up of people with cognitive developmental disabilities [formerly referred to as mental retardation], their families, friends, interested citizens, and professionals in the disability field. In addition to providing individual advocacy, information, support, education and systems advocacy to people with cognitive developmental disabilities and their families, The Arc in Jefferson County provides opportunities for all individuals, organizations and businesses to support full participation in society for individuals with cognitive developmental disabilities. When The Arc in Jefferson County uses the terms cognitive, intellectual or developmental disability, we are referring to mental retardation, a term that is no longer preferred. The Arc of the United States and The Arc in Jefferson County remain focused on serving those people and families we have served since The Arc of the USs founding in 1950.

The Arc in Jefferson County collaborates with other organizations to achieve sufficient funding, reasonable accommodations, education, healthcare, and civil rights for all people with disabilities who need similar supports and services in order to be productive and independent.

