

Pets for Life



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES

PFL TERMS & THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

A crucial component of the Pets for Life approach is maintaining thoughtful communication. Exercising cultural humility – the practice of looking inward and examining implicit bias – is an essential ingredient to being inclusive and valuing the perspective of all communities.

In addition to active listening, positive relationships are also built through respectful conversations. While certain words and phrases may be common in animal welfare, it's imperative that those within the field understand and acknowledge how language may be interpreted, or misinterpreted, by people who have different experiences.

Below are a few words, phrases and topics that are frequently used in the animal welfare field that can have negative consequences.

“Educate”

As in: “I’m going to **educate** people about the proper way to care for their pets.”

The problem: This implies that you’re unequivocally right and know the only way something can be done. It can also create a skewed teacher/student dynamic, where the person who is “educating” holds the power and can be perceived as talking down to his or her audience.

The alternative: “I’m going to **share information** with people about the resources I have to offer.”

“Responsible”

As in: “Our organization has an outreach program to teach people how to be **responsible** pet owners.”

The problem: It’s subjective and a matter of lacking access to resources. People are overwhelmingly caring.

The alternative: Break the habit of using this word to describe people. It’s judgmental and shortsighted.

“Neglectful” and “Cruel”

As in: “We won’t knock on the door to that house – those people are **neglectful** and **cruel** to animals.”

The problem: People are inherently good, not malicious, and are doing their best with limited resources.

The alternative: Be extremely careful with how you and your organization label people with these words. They’re not only hurtful and almost always inaccurate, but they can also permanently damage a person’s life if punitive measures are taken when the person and pet just need the info and resources we have.

“Stray” or “Feral Cats”

As in: “That neighborhood is full of **stray** dogs and **feral cats** that are left to fend for themselves.”

The problem: While on the surface some roaming/outdoor animals may seem like they’re not connected to anyone, they are a part of the community and residents are looking out for them. Err to the side of caution.

The alternative: “So many people in the community watch over/take in **roaming** dogs and are caregivers for colonies of **community cats**.”

“They / Them”

As in: “The benefits of spay and neuter is lost on **them**.” “**They** shouldn’t leave their dog outside.”

The problem: People, and the places they call home, have names. In general, you should use them. Replacing specifics with personal pronouns can seem like you’re painting entire groups of people with a broad brush. It’s also inherently divisive, labeling someone else as “the other”.

The alternative: “It’s important to be patient and clear when telling the community about procedures that may be unfamiliar and intimidating.” “We’re going to visit the Smith family about supplying a dog house for Diamond.”

“Help”

As in: “We’re **helping** them because they don’t have much money.”

The problem: I know, how could the word “help” be bad? While well-intentioned, be mindful that people in underserved communities are faced with many barriers. And while there are challenges to overcome, people living in poverty are incredibly resilient and creative. Affluent people don’t have the market cornered on power and self-sufficiency, and a person may hear the word “help” as “you can’t do this yourself”.

The alternative: “We’re **serving/supporting** communities where pet resources are often inaccessible.”

“Poor” or “At-Risk”

As in: “Our community outreach program focuses on providing pet services to **poor** areas.”

The problem: There are more dignified, less offensive sounding ways to communicate that residents in an area are experiencing poverty. Also, a term like “at-risk” is vague, assuming and insensitive.

The alternative: “Our community outreach program focuses on providing pet resources to **underserved communities**.”

“Humane Education”

As in: “Kids in underserved communities need **humane education**, so they grow up to be responsible.”

The problem: In the context of underserved communities, to “humanely educate” tends to imply that people in the community are disproportionately apt to not care or value animals in the same way as the educator. Also, education on pet care does painfully little when resources are inaccessible in the first place.

The alternative: Focus efforts on creating consistent access to services, sharing information along the way.

“Hoarding”

As in: “That person is **hoarder**, there’s nothing we can do to help them.”

The problem: Being overwhelmed with too many pets is usually a symptom of someone who cares a great deal about animals but needs some support to bring the situation to a manageable level. That’s why we’re here.

The alternative: “Work patiently with John to make sure he’s not inundated by too many of his beloved cats.”

With all types of communication -written or verbal- and whether with a pet parent, colleague, or donor, ask the following questions:

- Is my message considering all perspectives?
- Am I being considerate and respectful with my language?
- Am I basing my words on facts or am I making assumptions?
- Am I falsely generalizing or perpetuating stereotypes?
- Could my message be misinterpreted? If so, what is the impact?

Remember, the PFL team welcomes discussing these topics with you in a transparent and constructive way!