GVAT Policy on De-Stigmatizing Language

Policy:
Our language and conception of others should reflect our organisation's mission: to build community, inclusivity, to foster relationship building rather than destroying relationships, and to build a better world full of greater empathy, equality, and justice.

In Practice:
Words are important, and should be used with care. As individuals, and as organizations, we should continually strive to increase our awareness and implementation of language practices that reflect a de-stigmatized and socially aware and just perspective. Our conceptualization of different people, groups, and organisations should reflect our organizations' broad-based and inclusive organising perspective.

Example 1:
a) Stigmatized Language: We are fighting to give homes to homeless people.

b) De-stigmatized language: We are working with other organisations to improve housing options and affordability for the general population. We anticipate that people experiencing homelessness in particular may benefit from this campaign.

Takeaways:
a) has a top-down, paternalistic perspective of 'giving homes' to a disenfranchised needy 'homeless' population. Through this perspective, GVAT is the savior of a disempowered 'homeless' population. To describe

a population as homeless is to discriminate against them because it attributes their social position to their group identity (Farrugia, 2011).

b) is more precise because our work to create affordable housing is to improve housing options and affordability, which will in practice benefit many different groups. Additionally, describing "homeless people" as people experiencing homelessness is both more accurate (people aren't homeless, homelessness is an experience) and it eliminates the top-down perspective.

Example 2:
a) Stigmatized language: Drug addicts should be institutionalized in hospitals so that they can fix themselves.

b) De-stigmatized language: People experiencing mental health crises and substance use issues should have access to supportive services such as hospitalization and a variety of forms of rehabilitation to support them in their individual recovery from their health crisis.

Takeaways:

a) Labelling people as drug addicts bears significant stigma due to the connotations associated with 'drugs' and 'addicts'. To be a drug addict is to be a failure or less-than people who haven't experienced those addiction challenges. Labelling people as drug addicts also sums up their entire being in one trait or struggle, and diminishes them as less complex, or less than people who haven't experienced those addiction challenges. Additionally, a) is problematic because it mandates that the choice to be hospitalized or not should not be given, that people suffering from addictions should not have agency over their own decisions.

Keys to De-Stigmatizing Language:

1) Check the connotations of the categorizations you are using. Rather than describing a group as homeless, think about whether the adjective implies something negative or discriminatory. Reconceptualize the group using a more 'true' or less discriminatory frame. 'People experiencing homelessness', for instance, avoids the problematic framing of 'homeless people'.

2) Work to use language that empowers the people you are describing. For example, "homeless crackheads" would be disempowering language, whereas "the street community" would be empowering language. Community is an empowering word, and acknowledging where they live (the street) is also empowering. Rather than viewing our organisation as a top-down savior of needy people, we should strive to view ourselves and front-line service organisations as resources and amplifiers and bridges for people who often know what they need, and just need support to get there.

3) Remember that the negative connotations of language are deeply embedded in our society and therefore also in our brains. Everyone occasionally says something that bears those problematic connotations. The work and goal is to improve our ability to build community and supportive relationships through consistent and empowering language, and that this process will be ongoing and necessarily involve slip-ups, which are all learning opportunities.

References:

Farrugia, D. (2011). The symbolic burden of homelessness: Towards a theory of youth homelessness as embodied subjectivity. *Journal of sociology*, *47*(1), 71-87.