

May 15, 2009

State of Alabama
Press Release: [Mental Health, Department of](#)

STATEMENT FROM THE ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH REGARDING NAME CHANGE OF THE DEPARTMENT

MONTGOMERY - Over time, some words and terminology transform into slang or gain negative contexts that are offensive. The phrase *mental retardation* is a prime example of negative word evolution. Use of the “r word” is being dropped across the nation, on the state level and by advocacy groups; it is most commonly replaced with the term *intellectual disability*. Under the purview of the Commissioner, the department not only can, but did rename its Division of Mental Retardation Services to Division of Intellectual Disability Services last year. However, in order to change the name of the department, legislation had to be passed.

Recently, Representatives Randy Davis and Joe Faust, and Senator Vivian Figures co-sponsored a bill to eliminate the “r word” from the department’s name, which has had unanimous legislative support. This bill passed on May 14, 2009. Once the Governor signs it, the department will legally become The Alabama Department of Mental Health. Commissioner John Houston said, “The department is thrilled to see the Alabama Legislature and the Governor take another major step in supporting the use of appropriate language for people with an intellectual disability. We hope this raises awareness in the general public about the use of *people first language* in their everyday lives.” *People first language* is the simple notion that one should always place the person before the disability. Self-advocates from People First of Alabama and other groups led the way through the series of events to produce the name changing bill.

Last year Jeff Ridgeway, President of ADAC (Alabama Disability Action Coalition) and former President of People First of Alabama, led the fight to have the People First Language Bill passed. That bill required changes in the Code of Alabama regarding the use of derogatory language referencing people with a disability. Around that same time, People First of Alabama representatives met with Commissioner John Houston and expressed their desire to drop the “r word” from the name of the department and the Division of Mental Retardation Services. Commissioner Houston reflected, “When the people most directly affected by the terminology asked for the change, I respected their feelings and their wishes. At that moment, I knew that we would join them in asking for the name change. When you get right down to it, this is really an issue of stigma. The negative connotations associated with terms that we use when we refer to individuals or groups carry the weight of that stigma. Stigma is the greatest obstacle that we and the individuals that we serve face as we strive to create a life in the community for everyone.”

George Neal, a self-advocate and director of the Office of Consumer Empowerment for the department said, “Dropping the “r word” from the department’s name makes a loud and clear statement about the impact of good or bad words. Most people in life don’t feel the shame from name calling. When it happened to me in the past...I knew I was an OK guy, but it still hurt.” Neal went on to say, ‘I am so proud that Alabama has done the right thing.’ Jeff Ridgeway echoed Neal’s sentiments and said, “This is much, much better! To promote consumer dignity on the one hand and have a bad word in your department name on the other hand, seemed downright hypocritical to me. With the new name, both the department and the people it serves can hold their heads high.”

The department acknowledges that it will take time to replace stationary, other documents, and signage that contain the old name. It is not financially prudent to immediately destroy and reprint thousands of forms. However, every effort will be made to replace those items as quickly as possible, in consideration of the positive outcome for consumers and the public.

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RESOURCES

Information about mental health services in the state of Alabama can be

obtained by contacting the Department of Mental Health's Public Information Office, or by visiting us online at www.mh.alabama.gov, or by calling (334) 242-3417.

For more information, visit <http://mh.alabama.gov>

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