COMPASS FAMILY SERVICES
Housing. Support. Hope.

Inclusive Communications Guide

Cultivating an equitable, diverse, and inclusive organization is not only essential to the strength of Compass Family Services but is also. Practicing inclusive communications reinforces this commitment and helps to create a more welcoming, safe, and productive agency for all.

An essential role of communicators is to ensure that people of different identities and diverse backgrounds feel represented, affirmed, and supported while at Compass. Communications that don't consider the impact they might have on underrepresented or marginalized communities may unintentionally cause harm. Meanwhile, authentic, respectful, and purposeful communications can contribute to an inclusive and equitable environment and reinforce a sense of belonging.

The resources provided in this guide aim to assist communicators in achieving this goal across media, including written materials, photography, videography, social media, the web, and more.

Using the Guide

When to use it:

- Regularly and often.
- When attempting to prevent harm in communications.
- If you learn you've made a mistake or may have caused harm.

How to use it:

- Refer to it for specific-use cases
- Use it as the basis for your communication.
- Pursue professional and personal development on these topics.

Terminology

Below are definitions of foundational diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) concepts.

Diversity

Diversity encompasses all the ways in which human beings differ. There are many types of diversity: race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, marital status, education level, country of origin, parental status, religion, physical or cognitive abilities, and more. Diversity can also represent differences in lived experience. Valuing diversity means recognizing such differences, acknowledging that these differences compose an essential asset, and striving for diverse representation as a critical step toward equity.

Equity

Equity is achieving equal outcomes, not merely providing equal rights. Equal rights, without acknowledging unique circumstances and barriers and providing sufficient resources and opportunities, can still result in inequality. A more equitable future requires acknowledging the harm caused by our nation's history of unequal access to power, education, income, housing, health care, intergenerational wealth, and other resources and confronting how it continues to affect outcomes today. A diverse, inclusive environment is more likely to lead to equitable outcomes than a homogeneous and hierarchical

one. To view and use a frequently cited visual representation of equality versus equity, visit the [Interaction Institute for Social Change website](#).

Inclusion

Inclusion refers to fostering belonging and shared power. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [defines inclusion](#) as "a state of being valued, respected, and supported. It's about focusing on the needs of every individual and ensuring the right conditions are in place for [all people] to achieve [their] full potential."

Identity

The American Psychological Association [defines identity](#) as "an individual's sense of self-defined by (a) a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics that is not wholly shared with any other person and (b) a range of affiliations (e.g., ethnicity) and social roles." Read more about "[Why Identity Matters](#)" from the Critical Media Project.

Representation

To be genuine and authentic, representation is when a *community representative* reflects the shared power and inclusion experienced by that community. The representative is being tokenized if a community feels marginalized because they are not genuinely included.

Tokenism

Tokenism is the practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to meet a particular intended outcome, especially by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups to give the appearance of equality. An example of tokenism is using a news photo out of context to indicate the desired level of racial diversity.

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Principles

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An inclusive communications approach begins with our audience. It acknowledges that communication is not just about what we say but also about what our audience takes from it. To communicate optimally, we must be interested in and educate ourselves on the lived experiences of the people we share.

What follows are best practices to help communicators improve their work and avoid common mistakes. It's essential to remember that none of us will ever become full experts in communicating with people different from us, and norms and expectations will constantly change, but we can be lifelong learners.

As you approach your work, keep the following guiding principles in mind:

Be open to different perspectives

Our own experiences inform our worldview. If we are members of a majority group, we may have faced difficulty in our lives due to family dynamics, finances, lack of employment, or illness. Still, we may not have experienced oppression related to our identity. People with systematically oppressed identities may have dehumanizing experiences. Communicators should lead with empathy and ask themselves: *"How can I validate another's experience, even when I haven't had that experience myself?"*

Build your capacity

We must educate ourselves and improve our capacity for inclusive communications. The burden shouldn't fall on people from historically marginalized communities to do this work for us, especially

since one person can't speak to the experiences of all people who share an identity. Self-education should be considered a fundamental part of our jobs, not merely a professional development opportunity because inclusive practices should be incorporated into all work.

Obtain accountability partners

An accountability partner should be someone you trust to be transparent and honest and provide critical feedback when needed. We all have areas of growth. This responsibility should not solely fall on people from systematically oppressed groups, though their perspectives also shouldn't be excluded.

Practice humility

All of us will make mistakes. Truly listening to others, acknowledging our mistakes, and learning from them are critical components of inclusive communications.

Build relationships

This is a process about giving rather than taking. Building genuine, trusting relationships takes time, but it's the best way to broaden your perspective as a communicator — and you might find, when you get to know someone and demonstrate your willingness to help, listen, and learn, that they are willing to give you valuable feedback.

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Best Practices

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Visual Assets

Determine and define uses and objectives for visual content before creating images or selecting content from the photo or video libraries.

Use and present visual content within an authentic context. For example, ask yourself if the selected photo or video is illustrative of the broader event and topic or whether it's highlighted with the singular goal of representing the concept of diversity—the latter risks tokenizing individuals.

Don't assume one's identity — Be mindful that diversity is not always visible and encompasses more than race and ethnicity.

Never digitally or physically alter visuals with the intent to change substantive information or the original context of the photo or video, including the addition, subtraction, or modification of individuals.

Routinely review existing communications materials to ensure that images are still timely, and that content is still relevant and used correctly.

Written Content

Just as our approach to visual assets and social media should reflect inclusive best practices, so should our writing and storytelling in print. From the start, ask yourself whose perspectives are being reflected and whose may be left out.

- Include a broad range of voices and perspectives in written materials.
- Consider the language and word choices you use and whether they could cause harm by perpetuating stereotypes, reinforcing stigma, or further marginalizing a person or group of people by their identity.
- Focus on people and their actions, not their identities, unless their identity is relevant to the story. In these instances, always ask people how they identify — never assume.

- Before you use a specific identifier, phrase, or description for a person, consider whether it's something you would use when writing about someone of a different identity or from a diverse background.

What to do if you've made a mistake

We will all make mistakes. Usually, these are unintentional and sometimes even well-meaning. But they can still cause harm. How we respond can positively or negatively influence the impact. When we realize we've made a mistake or caused damage, consider the following steps you can take to correct it.

- **Find out precisely** what mistake you've made and what harm may have been done. Make sure you understand the raised points and talk to a trusted colleague if you need help.
- **Respond with empathy.** Thank whoever has pointed out your error. This acknowledges the role you played and the other person's perspective.
- **Apologize sincerely.** Make sure your apology is specific to the incident and not overly general. Never say, "I'm sorry if you felt …" say, "I'm sorry." Remember not to be defensive or dismissive in your apology.
- **Research the issue or matter at hand.** Look for information on the subject or topic and educate yourself. Determine ways to address and repair the harm — both now and in the future. Do not place this burden on individuals from marginalized or underrepresented groups.
- **Be timely in your response.** Allowing too much time to elapse before acknowledging the harm may unintentionally give the perception that you are ignoring or dismissing the issue.
- **Be accountable.** Ensure that someone, including yourself, is prepared to address complaints and frustrations appropriately.
- **Know when to move conversations offline.** Emails are great communication methods, but they are rarely best for conflict resolution. Ask if you can take the conversation offline to speak privately. This may allow you to forge a deeper understanding of the issue and better work toward resolution.