GUIDELINES FOR WRITING ABOUT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

PUT PEOPLE FIRST-- not their disability. Write: woman with arthritis, children who are deaf, people with disabilities, person with bi-polar. This puts the focus on the individual, not the particular functional limitation. Because of efforts to be succinct, it is not always possible to put people first. Consider the following variations: disabled persons, non-disabled people, deaf girl, paralyzed child. Avoid: crippled, handicapped, deformed, suffers from, infirm, victim of, the retarded, the disabled, the deaf and dumb, etc. Also, in lieu of autistic, diabetic, schizophrenic, etc., use: person with autism, child with diabetes or person with schizophrenia.

DO NOT USE GENERIC LABELS for disability groups, such as the retarded, the deaf, the disabled. Emphasize people, not labels. Write: people with mental retardation or people who are deaf.

DO NOT SENSATIONALIZE A DISABILITY by writing: afflicted with, crippled with, suffers from, victim of, etc. Instead, write: person who has multiple sclerosis or man who had polio.

Handicap. Not a synonym for disability. Describes a condition or barrier imposed by society, the environment, or by one's own self. Some individuals prefer inaccessible or not accessible to describe social and environmental barriers. Handicap can be used when quoting or citing laws and situations, but should not be used to describe a disability. Do not refer to people with disabilities as the handicapped or handicapped people. Instead: the building is not wheelchair accessible or the stairs are a handicap for her.

Wheelchairs. Write: plaintiff X is a wheelchair user or uses a wheelchair. Wheelchair-bound or confined to a wheelchair are not appropriate. (Many people who use chairs actually describe themselves as Aliberated@ rather than confined. If in doubt, remember that the only people who are bound are those going to Heaven or a subway destination).

Mental disability. The federal Rehabilitation Act (Section 504) lists four categories under mental disability: psychiatric disability, retardation, learning disability and cognitive impairment. Any of these terms is acceptable. Avoid: plaintiff is mentally ill. Instead, write: a person with mental illness or a psychiatric disability. There are a number of alternatives to psychiatric disability, e.g., mental health diagnosis, mental health condition or person with a psychiatric label.
MISCELLANEOUS:

**Nondisabled.** Appropriate term for people without disabilities. *Normal, able-bodied* or, *healthy* are inappropriate.

**Do not imply disease** when discussing disabilities that result from a prior disease episode. People who had polio and experienced after-effects have a postpolio disability. They are not currently experiencing the disease. Do not imply disease for people whose disability has resulted from anatomical or physiological damage (e.g., *person with spina bifida or cerebral palsy*). Reference to disease associated with a disability is acceptable only with chronic diseases, such as arthritis, Parkinson’s disease, or multiple sclerosis. People with disabilities should never be referred to as *patients* or *cases* unless their relationship with their doctor is under discussion.

**Deaf.** Deafness refers to a profound degree of hearing loss that prevents understanding speech through the ear. *Hearing impaired* and *hearing loss* are generic terms used by some individuals to indicate any degree of hearing loss—from mild to profound. These terms include: *people who are hard of hearing* (mild to moderate hearing loss that may or may not be corrected with amplification) and *deaf*. However, some individuals completely disfavor the term *hearing impaired*. Use: *woman who is deaf, boy who is hard of hearing, individuals with hearing losses, people who are deaf or hard of hearing*.

**HIV/AIDS.** Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome is an infectious disease resulting in the loss of the body’s immune system to ward off infections, caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). A positive test for HIV can occur without symptoms of the illnesses which usually develop up to 10 years later. Preferred: *people living with HIV, persons with AIDS* or *living with AIDS*. Do not use: *person who suffers from HIV or AIDS victim*. 