



Negative Impact of Deficit-Based Language

Desired Outcome:

- The OHIO YAB and ACTION Ohio encourage legislators and agencies to commit to adopt *person-first, trauma-informed language* that assigns accountability to the *lack of local resources* rather than the youth themselves, recognizing that teens are resilient individuals who deserve adequate medical and family support, not systemic liabilities.
- We believe this approach is beneficial to long-term advocacy goals, including family recruitment, systemic trust, and positive outcomes for vulnerable young people.
- Whereas pathologizing young people in the public eye inadvertently sabotages those goals, including making potential foster and adoptive families reluctant to take in teens.

Current Concern:

- It is vitally important to recognize and shift language that stigmatizes older youth in foster care.
- Funding urgency has led to a tendency of agencies to use urgent, crisis-driven terms (e.g., "high-acuity," "challenging behaviors," "system of last resort," "unmanageable") to compel legislators to allocate emergency funding and resources.

Negative Impact:

- When older youth hear themselves described in legislative testimony and news reports with terms like 'high-acuity,' 'system of last resort,' or 'behavioral crises,' this experience unintentionally deepens stigma and is emotionally harmful to them.
- This terminology also makes prospective foster parents fearful of welcoming teens into their homes. When agencies describe older teens as 'dangerous' or 'unmanageable' in news coverage to argue for budget lines, prospective foster caregivers become intimidated, and this lessens their likelihood to provide care for teenagers.
- This language creates barriers for teens transitioning from foster care into young adulthood as well. How we talk about foster youth in the public eye directly impacts their ability to heal and succeed. Employers and landlords who read about or watch news pairing foster youth with deficit-based language are less likely to hire or house them.

Proposed Strategy:

- We care and understand why agencies use crisis language in their efforts to secure state funding.
- There is a way to highlight systemic urgency without pathologizing the child. This can be done by:
 - **Separating the Behavior from the Identity:** Emphasizing that behavioral health needs are temporary adaptive responses to extreme stress and trauma, not permanent personality traits.
 - **Shifting the Focus from Child Deficits to Systemic Failures:** Instead of stating "These youth are too aggressive for standard homes," reframe to: "Our community lacks the trained, trauma-informed therapeutic foster homes these young people deserve."

This table was designed to offer a side-by-side comparison:

Deficit-Based Framing	The Unintended Stigma	Person-First, System-Accountable Alternative
<i>"Youth with severe behavioral problems or unmanageable behaviors."</i>	This frames normal trauma responses or frustration as intrinsic moral/character flaws, making foster parents fearful of taking older kids.	"Youth navigating complex trauma who need specialized, patient care."
<i>"High-acuity youth" "Multi-system youth."</i>	This reduces a human being to an expensive medical billing code or administrative category.	"Teens requiring multi-agency support and healthcare coordination."
<i>"Foster children services as a dumping ground or system of last resort."</i>	This implies youth diverted from juvenile justice are "waste" or unwanted liabilities rather than young people seeking protection.	"The child welfare system is stepping in to fill severe gaps in community mental healthcare."

Recommended Reading:

For further reference, please review the *Casey Family Programs Language Guide*.