

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/remembering-eddie-ellis-and-the-power-of-language>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Several weeks ago, I attended the memorial service for Eddie Ellis, who was, among many things (including a son, a father, a mentor, and a leader), a formerly incarcerated man and the founder of the Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions. I first met Eddie in 2007, not long after he wrote his well-known language letter. Called [An Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language](#), the letter was a challenge to abandon the dehumanizing language commonly used to describe incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people (including terms such as inmate and offender) and to replace it with language that reflected and respected the humanity of those being described. Noting that [w]e habitually underestimate the power of language, Eddie wrote: In an effort to assist our transition from prison to our communities as responsible citizens and to create a more positive human image of ourselves, we are asking everyone to stop using these negative terms and to *simply refer to us as PEOPLE*. People currently or formerly incarcerated, PEOPLE on parole, PEOPLE recently released from prison, PEOPLE in prison, PEOPLE with criminal convictions, but PEOPLE.

As someone who also believes deeply in the power of language, I quickly joined the ranks of those moved by Eddie and his letter. And when I was planning the demonstration project that is now [Common Justice](#) and seeking to develop language that reflected the humanity, dignity, and potential of all our participants both those harmed by and responsible for crime Eddie was one of the first people whose counsel I sought. Since then, we at Common Justice have consistently used the language I shared with him that day and that he celebrated as consistent with the spirit of his language letter. Instead of victim and offender, we say harmed party and responsible party, defining the terms as follows:

Harmed party is the person harmed in a given crime (aka victim). This term recognizes someones role in a given event and acknowledges that that role does not constitute the persons entire identity. A harmed party is owed certain things by the responsible party and others as a result of the harm he or she endured.

Responsible party is the person responsible for a given crime (aka offender). This term recognizes someones role in a given event and acknowledges that that role does not constitute the persons entire identity. A responsible party owes certain things to the harmed party and others as a result of the harm he or she caused.

The Italian director Federico Fellini once said a different language is a different vision of life. We hope our language embodies the vision of justice we aim to advance in our work, and that, in some small but tangible way, rises to the challenge Eddie posed to all of us.

A more thorough explanation of the rationale behind our use of this language may be found [here](#).

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