



CENTER FOR NuLEADERSHIP ON HUMAN JUSTICE & HEALING

An Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language

"When there is emotional pain, psychiatrists like me believe that we can help. But before we act we need to find some handle for the problem, some name to guide action. Once in awhile, we realize that these names are inadequate for the problems we are seeing. Then we search for new names, or new ways to group old names."

-- Mindy Thompson Fullilove, M.D., "Root Shock," 2005

Dear Friends:

The Center for NuLeadership on Human Justice and Healing is a Human Justice policy, advocacy and training center founded, directed and staffed by academics and advocates who were formerly incarcerated. It is the first and only one of its kind in the United States.

One of our first initiatives is to respond to the negative public perception about our population as expressed in the language and concepts used to describe us. When we are not called mad dogs, animals, predators, offenders and other derogatory terms, we are referred to as inmates, convicts, prisoners and felons—all terms devoid of humanness which identify us as "things" rather than as people. These terms are accepted as the "official" language of the media, law enforcement, prison industrial complex and public policy agencies. ***However, they are no longer acceptable for us and we are asking people to stop using them.***

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**.

We habitually underestimate the power of language. The bible says, ***"Death and life are in the power of the tongue."*** In fact, all of the faith traditions recognize the power of words and, in particular, names that we are given or give ourselves. Ancient traditions considered the "naming ceremony" one of the most important rites of passage. Your name indicated not only who you were and where you belonged, but also who you could be. The worst part of repeatedly hearing your negative definition of me, is that I begin to believe it myself *"for as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he."* It follows then, that calling me inmate, convict, prisoner, felon, or offender indicates a lack of understanding of who I am, but more importantly **what I can be.** I can be and am much more than an "ex-con," or an "ex-offender," or an "ex-felon."

The Center for NuLeadership on Human Justice and Healing believes that if we can get progressive publications, organizations and individuals like you to stop using the old offensive language and simply refer to us as **"people,"** we will have achieved a significant step forward in our life giving struggle to be recognized as the human beings we are. We have made our mistakes, yes, but we have also paid or are paying our debts to society.

We believe we have the right to be called by a name we choose, rather than one someone else decides to use. We think that by insisting on being called “**people**” we reaffirm our right to be recognized as human beings, not animals, inmates, prisoners or offenders.

We also firmly believe that if we cannot persuade you to refer to us, and think of us, as people, then all our other efforts at reform and change are seriously compromised.

Accordingly, please talk with your friends and colleagues about this initiative. If you agree with our approach encourage others to join us. Use positive language in your writing, speeches, publications, web sites and literature.

When you hear people using the negative language, gently and respectfully correct them and explain why such language is hurting us. Kindly circulate this letter on your various list serves.

If you disagree with this initiative, please write and tell us why at the above address or email us at info@centerfornuleadership.org. Perhaps, we have overlooked something.

Please join us in making this campaign successful. With your help we can change public opinion, one person at a time.

Thank you so much.

In Solidarity and Love,

Eddie Ellis
Founder

4 Easy Steps To Follow

- 1. Be conscious of the language you use. Remember that each time you speak, you convey powerful word picture images.**
- 2. Stop using the terms offender, felon, prisoner, inmate and convict.**
- 3. Substitute the word PEOPLE for these other negative terms.**
- 4. Encourage your friends, family and colleagues to use positive language in their speech, writing, publications and electronic communications.**



MISSION: We are the Center for NuLeadership on Human Justice & Healing (CNHJH). Our mission is to shift the paradigm and practice of public safety from criminal justice to Human Justice.

So what is Human Justice, exactly? ***Human Justice = Human Rights + Human Development***

Human Rights are all the things that people need for healthy and thriving lives. Human Rights include safe and clean housing, equitable access to land and resources, pro-human healthcare, truthful education, and more.

Human Development is the ability of people to create the social and cultural conditions to flourish free from oppression and to create a world where Human Rights are woven into the fabric of society.

Check out the video on our website, www.nuleadership.org and learn more about Human Justice.

For 20 years, NuLeadership has been community-based, community-focused and community-driven. Our mission is self-determination and liberation for Black, Indigenous, People of Color. We are a driving force in developing a small, but strong ecosystem of people, families, and neighborhoods where everyone learns and practices community care, accountability, forgiveness, and love.

As many of you know, our founder, Eddie Ellis, had this to say about NuLeadership's work: ***"Prisons and prison populations are a reflection of what takes place outside of the prisons. The direct relationship constitutes the basis by which we propose that there are no prison problems, only community problems. Once we begin to address community problems, prison problems will also be addressed."***

Our goal is Human Justice—to keep people from the policing and punishment systems while simultaneously divesting money from these systems to redirect to community-based, community-driven, human-centered housing, education, business, and justice solutions. *Human Justice* requires deep relationship-building, individual transformation and community investment, but more importantly, honesty and bravery to dismantle existing systems rooted in punishment and pain. *Human Justice* requires the confidence and skills to build new muscles and bandwidth to confront our own contradictions and to create the world we want to live in and leave for our children. This is long-term, hard work. We must organize while we mobilize. Join us as we continue and grow the legacy of resistance, liberation, and collective power. Join us in the journey to achieve Human Justice.

FEATURE INITIATIVES

NuLegacy connects urban youth and adults to land by helping them develop skills to live, heal and thrive in nature while caring for the earth in healthy and harmonious ways. Spearheaded and led by Chino Hardin, Co-Executive Director of CNHJH, transgender activist and member of the Blackfoot Indian Nation, through our live-in residency at WILDSEED Community Farm & Healing Village in Millerton, NY, we provide experiences such as camping, medicine workshops, healing circles and wellness retreats.

Chino, a third-generation Brooklynite, experienced nature for the first time while riding on a bus from Rikers Island to Bedford Hills, an upstate women's prison. While incarcerated, he longed to return home to Brooklyn and to see the mountains again. Upon his release more than 20 years ago, Chino began coalition-building and community organizing alongside leading figures and organizations instrumental in establishing criminal justice reform predicated upon

Human Justice and Healing. Equipped with his personal exploration and study of land stewardship, wilderness and survival skills, land-based healing and training, as well as experiences leading camping and retreats, particularly for LGBTQI+ individuals and system-involved youth, Chino has been teaching youth and families practices that connect to the land and its stewardship that leads to healing and transformation. Watch our [NuLegacy video](#) on www.nuleadership.org

Village Apprenticeship Program (VAP) is a community and people-centered decolonizing workforce development program designed to prepare workers, employers, and communities with the knowledge and skills and resources needed to build a cooperative, equitable, and vibrant village in a post-COVID world. VAP is building a community care workforce grounded in economic security, racial equity and cooperative economy. After two years of prototyping and developing the curriculum, we officially launched in March 2021. [Watch our VAP video](#) at www.nuleadership.org/VAP.

VAP apprentices participate in a six-week training program that includes an exploration of self, a study of *The People's History*, a critical look at dismantling oppressive systems, and understanding the labor movement. VAP business partners participate in a four-week seminar series that includes a critical examination of economic systems, a reflection on successful business leadership and development, and effective community networking.

Both apprentices and businesses receive funding to participate. Apprentices get opportunities to build skills, gain work experience and network. Businesses get help with marketing, accessing resources, and an apprentice to join their team. The goal of VAP's apprentice training program and business partner seminar series is to bring everyone together and to help apprentices prepare for their work placement and to help business partners prepare to mentor a dynamic and motivated young person.

Communiversity is an inclusive, barrier-free, no-cost learning space for the community to recognize, coordinate and activate neighborhood assets, gifts and resources to advance Human Justice and Healing. By starting with their own crew, their own block, their own neighborhood, community members seize short- and long-term opportunities to be in intimate collaborative relationship with each other as they develop resilience, agility and leadership to reimagine and shape a more equitable world. Recent courses have included *Soul-Writing: Writing As Medicine Workshop*, *Building your own Cooperative Business*, and *Financial Empowerment/Independence vs. Financial Literacy*.

Village Takeback interrupts arrest and incarceration cycles by building the day-to-day foundation for well-being and liberation through activities, spaces and resources that explore and build our sense of dignity, humanity, justice and love. We engage, train and hire community members to design and implement community-led public safety and conflict mediation without police and prosecution involvement. We provide bail and post-bail support as well as guaranteed income for our Village network in Brooklyn.

Human Justice Lab for Training and Policy provides a space to develop experiential learning and training content and design for our programs and campaigns as well as to design trainings that integrate policy change at all levels, from the precepts to revamping the terms and conditions of policy-making. We share best practices, expertise, tools and access to resources for service providers/educators; system-impacted individuals; and families/caregivers/parents whose children are system-impacted. The training services are designed to provide political education, tools for daily application, and convening everyone in our resource hub, which coordinates referrals and feedback, to ensure continuity and assessment of "services" provided by the system.