

DC COUNCIL BILL PROMOTES RESPECTFUL LANGUAGE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

New bill bans outdated language from DC laws and publications

Washington, DC – Councilmember Vincent C. Gray (Ward 7) introduced two bills to modernize language in the DC Code and in District government publications referring to persons with disabilities. The Arc of DC was pleased to work with Councilmember Gray on drafting this legislation.

“The language our government uses should recognize people with disabilities with respect. The disability comes second. They are people first,” said Gray.

The bills now under DC Council consideration are part of a national movement to correct outdated, disrespectful language in state laws and publications. Disability rights groups across the United States are promoting the use of language that refers to “people” first and describes their disability second. For example, the phrase “people with disabilities” is preferred, instead of “the disabled.”

The People First Respectful Language Modernization Act of 2006 requires the use of respectful, people first language in all new District laws, rules, regulations and publications that refer to people with disabilities. It also requires that all existing regulations and publications in active use be updated within six months to use people first language.

A companion bill, the People First Respectful Language Conforming Amendment Act of 2006, revises the existing DC Code to remove offensive terms currently in the statute, such as “feble-minded,” “lunatic” and “idiot.”

“Respectful language is long overdue,” says Mary Lou Meccariello, Executive Director of The Arc of the District of Columbia. “Residents with disabilities are people first and foremost. By adopting respectful language, the District government will establish a standard of respect for people with disabilities in our community.”

Councilmember Gray introduced both bills at the Council of the District of Columbia’s March 7, 2006 legislative session. Cosponsors were: Chairman Cropp and Councilmembers Brown, Catania, Graham, Fenty, Orange, and Mendelson. With eight members in support, Gray is optimistic the bill will move quickly. The bill was referred to the Committee of the Whole. A hearing date is pending.

As noted by Councilmember Gray, “People first language can help to improve society’s attitudes about people with disabilities. It’s compassionate and respectful. I am grateful to all of the Councilmembers who signed on as cosponsors, and I look forward to seeing this legislation enacted.”

Copies of the bills are available at

<http://makeashorterlink.com/?M2BA320DC> and at
<http://makeashorterlink.com/?R5DA610DC>.