

**IMPROVING COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH INCLUSION OF
RACIAL AND ETHNIC MINORITIES IN RECOVERY ADVOCACY EFFORTS**



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Language matters. It's a phrase often spoken among recovery advocates, and generally refers to shifting the way we speak about addiction and recovery so that we reduce the stigma surrounding substance use disorders. There is evidence behind the movement, with one study noting that even mental health professionals were more likely to favor punitive over therapeutic measures if a case history referred to a patient as a "substance abuser" instead of a person with a "substance use disorder".¹ The conversation about "people first" language is an important dialogue to have, as stigmatizing words can foster an environment that is hostile to treatment and recovery. It is vital that we shift the language so that shame ceases to be a barrier to those seeking help. Furthermore, we must ensure that recovery messaging is carried to ALL who need to hear it. Too often, minority populations are left out of the conversation.

Cultural Sensitivity Matters

If we are to build recovery ready communities, we must address the whole community, not just the majority population. To this end, there is a fundamental shift that must take place regarding recovery messaging. Not only must we eliminate stigmatizing language, but we must also ensure that everyone who needs to hear the message can understand and relate to it. We must take steps to reach across class, racial and ethnic divides in our endeavors to share life saving information concerning overdose prevention, harm reduction, addiction treatment, and recovery support. Currently, recovery messaging is tailored almost exclusively for a non-hispanic white, English-speaking audience. By failing to include diversity in our messaging and our messengers, we are leaving out racial and ethnic minorities. While it is doubtful that this is intentional, the outcome is the same. The recovery movement is exacerbating already existing disparities in treatment. This needs to change if we are to have a unified front in creating positive norms with regard to addiction, treatment, and recovery.

Diversity Matters

Recovery advocates are quick to note that addictive illness and overdose have no boundaries. Substance use disorders affect people of all races, all ethnicities, and all socio-economic classes. Addiction directly affects fully one in three Americans (either

¹Kelly, John F. and Westeroff Cassandra, "Does It Matter How We Refer to Individuals with Substance-Related Conditions? A Randomized Study of Two Commonly Used Terms" *International Journal of Drug Policy*, May 2010, Volume 21, pp. 202-207

because they have a substance use disorder; they are in recovery from a substance use disorder, or they have a direct relative who has or is in recovery from a substance use disorder). Despite this, the recovery movement shows an astonishing lack of diversity. The white, non-hispanic middle and upper classes have become the faces and voices of the recovery movement. Yet, a third of the population is not exclusively white and non-hispanic. According to U.S. Census Data, nearly 18 percent of the population is Latino/Latina, and nearly 14 percent of the population is black or African-American. Include those who identify as bi-racial, and more than a third of the population is a member of a racial or ethnic minority.² In some communities the percentage of racial and ethnic minorities is much higher. For instance, in Miami, Florida, nearly 68 percent of the population is Hispanic.³ We cannot have a robust recovery movement if we leave out these people.

Members of the Latino community and other minority communities are far more likely to receive punishment than treatment when it comes to drug offenses. This has less to do with stigmatizing language and more to do with existing racial, ethnic, and socio-economic disparities. In 2015, The Drug Policy Alliance noted that although they constitute only 30% of the population, Latinos and Blacks represent 57% of people incarcerated in state prisons and 77% of those incarcerated in federal prisons.⁴ Furthermore, even when Latinos and African Americans are able to access treatment for substance use disorders, they are less likely to complete their treatment programs.⁵ In order for this to change, the advocacy community and the treatment industry must give more than lip service to diversity and cultural competence. If we wish for all people to have access to recovery, we must ensure that all really means all. Latinos and other minorities must be able to access and complete treatment, and they must be represented in the recovery movement. How can we have a unified movement when we leave out more than a third of the population?

Language Matters

Recovery messaging is almost exclusively delivered in English to a non-hispanic audience. Not only is there a serious problem regarding the lack of diversity among the messengers, there is also a problem with the delivery of the message. How is one

² www.census.gov/topics/population/race.html

³ www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/miamidadecountyflorida/PST045216

⁴ "The Drug War, Mass Incarceration, and Race," Drug Policy Alliance Fact Sheet, June 2015

⁵ Saloner, Brendan and LeCook, Benjamin, "Blacks and Hispanics Are Less Likely to Complete Addiction Treatment, Largely Due to Socioeconomic Factors," *Health Affairs* 32, pp. 135-145

supposed to receive it, if one does not speak English? We know addiction is pervasive and universal, cutting across social, racial and ethnic divides. Desperation has no language. Overdose kills regardless of language. Naloxone saves lives regardless language. ***Recovery is real in every language.*** As we carry the message that overdose deaths are preventable, addiction is treatable, and recovery is possible, we must take care to translate our words so that all who need the message can get it. Knowing that lives hang in the balance, how could we in good conscience deny information to non-English speakers? The obvious answer is we cannot; we must not.

Dismantling Cultural Barriers to Recovery Messaging

There are some readily apparent ways to begin addressing the issue of diversity and cultural competence in the recovery advocacy movement. First, and foremost, we must eliminate the language barrier. Information can be translated. Websites for major advocacy groups (Facing Addiction, Young People In Recovery, Shatterproof, etc.) can add links to make information available to non-English speakers. Documentaries produced by recovery advocates can include subtitles in Spanish. These are simple steps that can have immediate and profound effects when it comes to including the Latino population in the recovery movement.

Expanding the reach of the recovery message is critical to changing public perception about addiction, treatment, and recovery. The advocacy movement is already engaged in efforts to take the message of recovery out of confines of support group rooms and into the larger community. These outreach efforts must expand to include populations that are historically under-represented in the recovery community. This requires re-thinking channels of delivery. It means reaching beyond treatment center alumni groups, support groups, and recovery community organizations. If the advocacy community is to reach racial and ethnic minorities, the message must be delivered through their existing social support networks, such as churches, fraternities, community centers, and cultural organizations. Only when we meet people where they are, hear their needs, and work together for meaningful change, can we build recovery support systems that serve the whole community.

Inclusivity Matters

A recovery movement that ignores the needs of a third of the population is unsustainable. We must work for inclusivity in advocacy efforts. If addiction affects all races, cultures, and classes, recovery should be universal. Our message and our messengers must reflect that. Together, we can make recovery a reality for ALL.

