



**CONSORTIUM FOR CITIZENS
WITH DISABILITIES**

Statement from CCD Task Force on Developmental Disabilities, Autism and Family Supports

February 4, 2021

The battle for dignity, inclusion and respect of all people with intellectual disabilities continues today -- just as it did over a decade ago when Rosa Marcellino, a 9-year-old girl with Down syndrome successfully advocated with her parents and siblings to have the words "mentally retarded" officially removed from the health and education laws in her home state of Maryland and later from all federal health, education and labor statutes. Her efforts removed the offensive, outdated medical terminology in federal law and replaced it with respectful language such as, "individual with an intellectual disability" and "intellectual disability." This campaign to eliminate the "R-word" represented a historic turning point for disability advocates who pressed our government to move away from derogatory language and towards a more inclusive and kinder society.

We call on all elected officials and community leaders to take a close look at the language they use -- because words matter. We know that language has consequences. When people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are dehumanized through the use of slurs, the result is often exclusion from opportunities to learn, live, and work in the community. When public figures additionally use intellectual disability as a synonym for ignorance or incompetence or refer to people with intellectual disabilities as "stupid," people with intellectual disabilities are at greater risk of discrimination in schools, in the workplace, in housing contexts, and elsewhere.

Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, our country has put forth the proposition that people with disabilities should be free from "unfair and unnecessary discrimination and prejudice" and that the Federal Government "plays a central role" in enforcing these rights. Use of the "R-word" or any derogatory language or slurs against people with intellectual or other disabilities is an attempt to dehumanize them and promotes a climate of hatred and discrimination.

The United States is at a critical point in our history to recognize the inherent rights of all individuals to be free from discrimination. We must join the fight to stop discrimination and prejudice against people with intellectual disabilities by holding our elected officials accountable for the use of unacceptable and hurtful slurs.