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## War of Words

**By Julie Kirkwood**  
*Staff Writer*

John R. Anton of Haverhill developed a strategy early on to deal with kids who called him "retarded." He ignored them. Now 39, Anton lives a very independent life despite his Down syndrome, but he still hears that word on a regular basis. It's no longer kids calling him names; it's plastered on signs and doorways whenever he goes to the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation.

"The way I see the word 'retardation,' I think it's labeling all of us, which is not right," Anton said. "We all know we have a disability. But it's supposed to be people first before a disability."

Anton has stopped ignoring the insult, and he's taking his call for change all the way to the Statehouse. Anton and his friend Buddy Bostick of Newburyport have convinced state Rep. Michael Costello, D-Newburyport, to file a bill to change the agency's name to the Department of Developmental Services. This month they held a benefit rock concert and passed out fliers at the Topsfield Fair to gain support for their cause.

Their activism has reignited a long-running debate in the disability community about labels and the stigma attached to certain terminology.

On one side are self-advocates such as Anton and activists such as Bostick, a Department of Mental Retardation employee who also works for the nonprofit group AEI Community Support Services. They say the word "retarded" is offensive no matter who uses it.

But they have met resistance from such people as Gerald J. Morrissey Jr., commissioner of the Department of Mental Retardation, who says the stigma is attached to the disability, not just the name, and activism efforts would be better spent changing people's attitudes about disabilities.

"What is the purpose in selecting a new name?" Morrissey

said. "Every name has a potential stigmatization with it."

On a more practical matter, Morrissey worries changing the agency's name would change the definition of who's eligible for services.

The term mental retardation has a specific clinical definition. It characterizes a person whose intelligence is impaired and who also has trouble functioning in some aspect of everyday life, such as managing money, relating to people or preparing meals, according to the American Association on Mental Retardation.

The phrase "developmental disability," which is often used interchangeably with mental retardation, is technically not the same thing. A developmental disability is any type of chronic, life-long physical or intellectual impairment that interferes with at least three aspects of a person's daily life. Mental retardation can be one cause, but so can cerebral palsy, epilepsy or autism.

The Arc of Massachusetts, formerly known as the Association for Retarded Citizens until it eliminated the word "retarded" from its name a few years ago, now refers to its constituency as "individuals with cognitive and developmental disabilities."

"It is hard to say in one sentence," acknowledges Executive Director Leo Sarkissian. "Whenever you say mental retardation it's really clear."

In fact, there are people within the Arc who still prefer the more direct terminology, Sarkissian said. The Arc is withholding its support for the bill to change the state agency's name, at least until the wording is straightened out.

Such objections make no sense to a group of adults who met last week at Hogan Regional Center in Danvers, who say they simply don't want to be called mentally retarded.

"The name 'retardation' means to dehumanize, to put us down," said Joseph Canto of Haverhill. "It means to say we are numbers, we are not people."

Their group, Mass. Advocates Standing Strong, has been pushing the Department of Mental Retardation for years to change its name. They said the word "retarded" feels like a put-down because it focuses on what they can't do rather than what they can. Many of them prefer the word disabled.

"People think that we can't do anything," said Mona Cardoza

of Malden. "They think that we're not capable of going food shopping or handling money. ... And it's not true. We can take care of ourselves."

Costello said the wording of his bill makes it clear that the same people are eligible for services under the renamed agency.

"Most states across the country have already changed the department's name," Costello said. "It's a natural change that's long overdue."

At the meeting in Danvers, there was one pressing question the self-advocates had for Bostick: How long will it be before people stop calling them retarded?

Changing the agency name won't magically remove the stigma on disabilities, Bostick said, but it's a start.

"At least we can set an example and not have the state retain what in this day and age is a vulgarity," Bostick said.

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## Addressing Disabilities

Talking about people with disabilities or any group that has been discriminated against can be a minefield.

Judy Tso, an anthropologist and diversity expert with Aha Solutions Unlimited in Boston, said it's a universal phenomenon that groups who have been discriminated against want to come up with their own words to define who they are. "People have a desire to claim a new term or redefine things so it doesn't feel so much like being labeled," Tso said. Using the right terminology is important in a business setting or in a casual encounter when you want to show respect, says Tso, who does corporate and government diversity training. Yet political correctness can easily get out of control, she said, especially when somebody is so afraid of saying the wrong thing they say nothing at all. Here's how the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy suggest referring to different disabilities:

Negative phrases      Affirmative phrases

Retarded; mentally defective      Person with an intellectual, cognitive, developmental disability

The blind Person who is blind, person who is visually impaired

The disabled; handicapped Person with a disability

The deaf; deaf and dumb Person who is deaf

Suffers a hearing loss Person who is hard of hearing

Afflicted by multiple sclerosis Person who has multiple sclerosis

Cerebral palsy victim Person with cerebral palsy

Epileptic Person with epilepsy, person with seizure disorder

Confined or restricted to a wheelchair Person who uses a wheelchair

Stricken by muscular dystrophy Person who has muscular dystrophy

Crippled; lame; deformed Person with a physical disability, physically disabled

Dumb; mute Unable to speak, uses synthetic speech

Crazy; nuts Person with psychiatric disability

Has overcome his/her disability; is courageous Person who is successful, productive

Source: U.S. Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy

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