



AN ACT DIGNIFYING INDIVIDUALS WITH INTELLECTUAL OR DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

H. 232 / S. 137, filed by Rep. Finn, Rep. Garballey, and Sen. Jehlen

This bill would replace offensive phrases and words such as “the r-word,” “handicap,” etc. in Massachusetts General Laws with more appropriate language, such as “person with an intellectual or developmental disability.” These derogatory words alienate people with disabilities and are used to insult and discriminate.

CONTEXT

- Terms such as “the r-word” are offensive and hold negative connotations, harkening back to when individuals with disabilities were excluded from their communities.
- There is a growing movement to use person-centered language and more appropriate terms such as “person with an intellectual or developmental disability.”
- 40 states have banned these offensive terms, and in 2010, President Obama signed “Rosa’s Law,” which updated federal law to include more appropriate language toward people with disabilities. However, Massachusetts General Laws still use outdated, offensive words and phrases.

THE BILL

- Very simply, this bill replaces offensive language regarding people with disabilities with phrases that are widely accepted as appropriate and person-centered.
- Terms that would be replaced include “the r-word” and “handicap.” They would be replaced with phrases such as “persons with disabilities” and “person with an intellectual or developmental disability.”
- Extensive research has gone into ensuring that as drafted, this bill would only change the terms—not access to services.

THE IMPACT

Words have power. Language influences attitudes and actions towards people and their abilities. Use of offensive language perpetuates negative stereotypes. But, change is happening. In society and culture, these terms are finally widely understood to be cruel, demeaning, and insulting, and people are using it less often in casual conversation. However, our state laws do not reflect this overdue societal change.