

# Code for America Style Guide

This style guide is internal writing guidance for Code for America staff and Brigade members. You are welcome to share some of our best practices around language with people outside the Network, but please do not share this document directly.

## Writing goals and principles

With every piece of content we publish, we aim to:

- **Understand and meet your readers' needs.** Tell readers what they need to know, not just what we want to say. For example, we may want our donors to understand everything about our programs, but they may need to feel a values alignment.
- **Empathize.** Put yourself in your readers' shoes, and don't patronize them. Remember that they have other things to do. Don't market at people; communicate with them.
- **Include.** Use language that informs your readers and encourages them to engage with us and our work. Consider what might be unintentionally alienating.
- **Focus on the positive.** Change is hard. We lead positively when possible. We invite people in to see what is possible, what can be done and what should be done, and to act. Think "government can work better" over "government is broken" — most of the time.
- **Celebrate.** Lift up others, celebrate their achievements, and involve diverse voices. Our self-confidence is demonstrated through our generosity to others.
- **Add a unique perspective.** Code for America is unlike any other nonprofit. We have something unique to say on many national and local issues, driven by our theory of change and the human-centered view we take of systems.

In order to achieve those goals, we make sure our content is:

- **Clear.** Understand the topic you're writing about. Plain words are generally better than fancier words. And if you don't understand what something means, your readers won't either, so don't publish it.
- **Useful.** Before you start writing, ask yourself: What purpose does this serve? Who is going to read it? What do they need to know? Avoid stating the obvious. If the copy you've written could equally describe another organization or initiative, then it's not useful.

- **Friendly.** Write like a human with a personality. Don't be afraid to break a few rules if it makes your writing more relatable. You wouldn't talk in endless long sentences with no breaks or with jargon or buzzwords. Don't write like that.
  - **Appropriate.** Write in a way that suits the situation and the audience. Just like you do in face-to-face conversations, adapt your tone depending on who you're writing to and what you're writing about.
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- **Remember the 5 Cs:**

- Concise: Fewer words are generally better than more words. Edit!
  - Complete: Especially in grant reports, have we covered all the elements we need?
  - Correct: It's easy to get the details confused when talking about technical project or complex systems. Are we sure we're saying the right thing?
  - Coherent: Is there a clear purpose or thesis for each piece of writing, and does each element of the writing advance the narrative?
  - Convincing: Have we made the case? Put yourself in the reader's shoes. Would you be moved to fund, volunteer, sign up, attend, or complete whatever call to action we're asking them to do?
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## Mission and core values

There are other documents that more fully capture our mission and core values than the Style Guide, but here are a few things to keep in mind when writing for Code for America. While you do not need to encapsulate everything Code for America stands for in every piece of content, your point should help illustrate our overarching purpose: **to make government work for the people who need it most**. This sometimes means pointing out when it doesn't, but always looking to solve problems in an **delivery-driven** way. To learn why we do what we do, read "[Making Government Work in Crisis](#)," "[Building a Government With Heart](#)," and any of our [Delivery-Driven Government](#) publications.

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## Voice and tone

### Voice

Code for America's voice is human. It's informative, friendly, and straightforward. Our priority is to be approachable and instructive. We want to educate people without patronizing or confusing them.

Code for America's voice is:

- **Confident**, not cocky.
- **Caring**, not suffocating.
- **Patient**, not patronizing.
- **Honest**, not oversharing.
- **Friendly**, not casual.
- **Curious**, not nosy.
- **Knowledgeable**, not know-it-alls.
- **Optimistic**, not naive.

### Tone

Code for America's tone is usually conversational, but it's always more important to be clear than entertaining. When you're writing, identify your audience: are they casual blog readers? Are they public servants looking for important, career changing information? Are they volunteers who want to be recognized for their work? Understanding a reader's goals and mindset will inform the tone you take. Adjust your tone accordingly.

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## Writing blog posts

Code for America blog posts are written by people from all over the company, not just those with “writer” in their job titles. We love having experts from around the organization write about their work. The person most familiar with the subject is in the best position to convey it, and the writers on the marketing team can help with brainstorming and editing as needed.

## **Basics**

We aim to update the main Code for America blog at least once a week. We generally publish:

- Thought leadership pieces from our founder and other staff
- Peek-behind-the-curtain technical and design content
- User research and client success learnings
- Spotlights on projects from throughout the Brigade Network, including the Community Fellowship
- Examples of how we employ Delivery-Driven Government principles practices in our own work

We publish blog posts that demonstrate our impact, show how we build community, and highlight the work of others in our network, all keeping the audience in mind. We want to show people that we're a thought leader in how we improve delivery of government services for those who need them most, and we use our blog to tell the stories related to that.

## **General tips**

### **Use active voice**

- Bad: "Code for America was founded by Jennifer Pahlka."
- Good: "Jennifer Pahlka founded Code for America."

### **Show, don't tell**

- Bad: "The form was long."
- Good: "The form took over an hour to complete and was 55 pages long."

### **Be conversational, but smart**

This isn't a term paper, so there's no need to be stuffy. Drop some knowledge while casually engaging your readers with conversational language.

### **Be specific**

If you're writing about data, put the numbers in context. Try to avoid acronyms unless they're widely known. If you're writing about a user of a government service, give the reader plenty of information about their motivations, challenges, and unique perspective.

### **Get to the point**

Get to the important stuff right away, and don't bury the lede. Blog posts should be scannable and easy to digest. Break up your paragraphs into short chunks of three or four sentences, and use subheads. Our readers are busy, and we should always keep that in mind.

### **Link it up**

Add links to other blog posts or pages on our website to draw connections. Feel free to link away from Code for America if it helps you explain something.

### **Use pictures**

Include images in your blog posts when it makes sense. The [Code for America Flickr](#) is a good resource for images. If you're explaining how to use GetCalFresh or GetYourRefund, include screenshots to illustrate your point.

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## **Writing technical content**

At Code for America, technical content is mostly written by individual product teams. It appears under [How-Tos](#) on the Code for America website, under [Tech and Design](#) on the legacy Medium blog, and in a few other locations. This section will lay out the guiding principles of technical content, discuss the main types of technical content, and outline the process of writing and editing technical articles.

### **Basics**

Someone reading technical content is usually looking to answer a specific question. That question might be broad or narrowly-focused, but either way our goal is to provide answers without distraction.

For each project, consider your audience's background, goal, and current mood. Ask these questions:

- What is the reader's level of technical expertise?
- What is the goal of the reader? To complete a task? To research a topic?
- Is the reader in the middle of a task? Are they in a hurry? Could they be frustrated?

We don't want to overload a reader with unnecessary information, choices to make, or complex ideas or phrases, when we don't have to. This is particularly critical when a user may be unfamiliar with Code for America and/or frustrated with a project. When relevant, prime the reader with a brief outline of an article's focus in an introductory paragraph or section, and stick to the topic at hand. Keep sentences, paragraphs, and procedural steps focused and concise.

## **Types of technical content**

Technical content articles vary in target audience, goal, and tone. Code for America technical content is built from 2 templates, which serve different purposes and readers.

### **Case Study**

- Description: An breakdown of a specific challenge faced by a Code for America team or government partner and how it was solved.
- User type: Brigade members, civic technologists, coders, governments
- Goal: Demonstrate how the work of CFA and its partners makes a difference for citizen and government organizations

### **How To**

- Description: A resource of step-by-step instructions for government organizations and practitioners with enough specificity for users to use the tool or process for their own work.
- User type: Brigade members, civic technologists, coders
- Goal: To fork existing products or tackle issues related to product rollout

## **Guidelines**

### **Drafting technical content**

Before you begin writing a new article, reach out to a subject matter expert at Code for America (like a product manager, designer, or researcher) to get as much information as

possible. You may only use a small portion of what you learn, but it helps to have more information than you need to decide where to focus your article.

Consider how many articles are needed and what article types will best describe a process or case study to the user.

Outline your article, then write a draft. Stay in touch with your subject matter expert and revise as needed for accuracy, consistency, and length.

When you're happy with a draft, pass it to Ruthie or Elizabeth on the Marketing team for peer review. For new content or highly complex content, send last draft to your subject matter expert for final approval.

### **Writing technical content**

When writing technical content, follow the style points outlined in the Voice and tone and Grammar sections. Here are some more general pointers, too.

- **Stay relevant to the title**

When a user clicks the title of an article, they expect to find the answer they want. Don't stray too far from the title or topic at hand. Use links to make related content available. If you find you're getting too far from the intended topic, then you may need to create a separate but related article.

- **Keep headlines and paragraphs short and scannable**

Focused users often scan an article for the part that will answer their particular question. Be sure headlines are short, descriptive, and parallel, to facilitate scanning.

- **Use second-person and describe actions to a user**

Technical content talks to users when support agents can't.

- **Strive for simplicity and clarity**

Be as clear as possible. Use simple words and phrases, focus on the specific task, limit the number of sentences per paragraph.

- **Provide context through embedded screenshots**

Screenshots may not be necessary for every article or process, but can be helpful to explain in a different way. Crop screenshots tightly around the action to focus attention.

### **Writing technical content should meet these three goals:**

#### **Digestibility**

- Cut or tighten redundancies, adverbs, and passive constructions.
- Use the simplest word.
- Limit paragraphs to three sentences.

#### **Consistency**

- Use the labels and terminology used in other Code for America content.
- Use specific, active verbs for certain tasks.
- Choose basic words and phrases to facilitate consistency across translated content.

#### **Helpfulness**

- Stay conversational.
- Avoid qualifiers that muddy meaning.
- Craft clear transitions from section to section to orient the reader.

#### **Ordered Lists**

Only use ordered lists for step-by-step instructions. Separate steps into logical chunks, with no more than 2 related actions per step. When additional explanation or a screenshot is necessary, use a line break inside the list item.

#### **Unordered Lists**

Use unordered lists to display examples, or multiple pieces of advice. If an unordered list comprises more than 10 items, use a table instead. It's easier to read.

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## **Writing Email Newsletters**

We send a lot of email ourselves, and we follow our own best practices to set an example for users. But as devices shrink and the inbox evolves, our oldest tip is still the most important: Only send when you have something to say.

## **Basics**

Our email newsletters help empower and inform Code for America fans, donors, and partners. Here are the most common types of content we send by email:

- Regular monthly newsletters
- Event invitations
- Campaign or service announcements — GetCalFresh, Clear My Record, the Community Fellowship, etc.
- Brigade-specific communications

## **Guidelines**

Email newsletters generally follow the style points outlined in the Voice and tone and Grammar sections. Here are some additional considerations.

### **Consider all elements**

Every email newsletter is made up of the following elements. Make sure they're all in place before clicking send:

#### **From name**

This is usually the company or individual sender's name. It identifies the sender in the recipient's inbox.

#### **Subject line**

Keep your subject line descriptive. There's no perfect length, but some email clients display only the first words. Tell—don't sell—what's inside. Subject lines should be in sentence case.

#### **Preheader text**

The top line of your campaign appears beside each subject line in the inbox. Provide the info readers need when they're deciding if they should open.

#### **Body copy**

Keep your content concise. Write with a clear purpose, and connect each paragraph to your main idea. Add images when they're helpful.

#### **Consider your perspective**

When sending an email newsletter from Code for America, use the 3rd person “we.” When sending a newsletter as an individual, use the 1st person “I.”

### **Use a hierarchy**

Most readers will be scanning your emails or viewing them on a small screen. Put the most important information first.

### **Include a call to action**

Make the reader's next step obvious, and close each campaign with a call to action. Link to a blog post, event registration, or signup page. You can add a button or include a text link in the closing paragraph. Whether you're asking people to read something, share something, or respond to something, offer a clear direction to close your message so readers know what to do next.

### **Avoid unnecessary links**

More than 50 percent of emails are read on a mobile device. Limit links to the most important resources to focus your call to action and prevent errant taps on smaller screens.

### **Segment your audience**

It's exciting to send to the full email list, but it's doubtful that every subscriber is interested in every topic. Segment your list to find a particular audience that's likely to react.

Once you've selected an audience, adjust the language to fit their needs. For example, newsletter subscribers who signed up via the talent initiative are more likely to be interested in job-related content.

### **Test your campaigns**

Read your campaign out loud to yourself, then send a test to a coworker for a second look. Make sure to run an A/B campaign to test subject line, content order, or some other metric, so each email is an opportunity to learn what resonates best with readers.

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## Writing for Social Media

We use social media to share what we're up to and to build relationships with Code for America supporters, Brigades, and others in our network. But it also creates opportunities to say the wrong thing and potentially damage our brand. So we're careful and deliberate in what we post to our social channels. This section lays out how we strike that delicate balance.

### Basics

Code for America has a presence primarily on two major social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook. These channels are managed by the marketing team. Here are our most active accounts and what we usually post on each:

- **Twitter:** Brand marketing, events, media mentions, evergreen content, “we’re hiring!” posts, news from our network
- **Facebook:** Events, media mentions, evergreen content, “we’re hiring!” posts
- **LinkedIn:** Recruiting content, media mentions, evergreen content

### Guidelines

Our writing for social media should generally follow the style points outlined in the Voice and tone and Grammar sections. Here are some additional pointers, too.

#### Write short, but smart

Some social media platforms have a character limit; others don't. But for the most part, we keep our social media copy short.

- **Twitter:** 260 characters or less (this leaves room for a manual retweet and comments)
- **Facebook:** No limit, but aim for 1-2 short sentences.

To write short, simplify your ideas or reduce the amount of information you're sharing—but not by altering the spelling or punctuation of the words themselves. It's fine to use the shorter version of some words, like “info” for “information.” But do not use numbers and letters in place of words, like “4” instead of “for” or “u” instead of “you.”

#### Engagement

Do your best to adhere to Code for America style guidelines when you're using our social media channels to interact with people. Use correct grammar and punctuation—and avoid excessive exclamation points.

When appropriate, you can tag the subject of your post on Twitter or Facebook. But avoid directly tweeting at or otherwise publicly tagging a post subject with messages like, “Hey, we wrote about you!” Never ask for retweets, likes, or favorites.

- Yes: “#FlashbackFriday to @lippytak's talk on a user-centered approach to #foodstamps from the 2015 @codeforamerica Summit”
- No: “Hey @lippytak, can you RT this tweet we wrote about you? ”

## Hashtags

We employ hashtags rarely and deliberately. We may use them to promote an event or connect with users at a conference. Do not use current event or trending hashtags to promote Code for America.

## Trending topics

Do not use social media to comment on trending topics or current events that are unrelated to Code for America.

Be aware of what's going on in the news when you're publishing social content for Code for America. During major breaking news events, we turn off all promoted and scheduled social posts.

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## Writing about people

First, some notes:

*People-first language* centers people as full human beings rather than as their particular circumstances or experiences, acknowledging that one experience or situation does not define a person's whole life.

Some examples of people-first language include using “people experiencing homelessness” rather than “homeless people” or “people living with convictions” rather than “convicted people,” “convicts,” or “former prisoners.”

[Systems-centered language](#) seeks to end the dehumanization of people that occurs while discussing how they are experiencing oppression. It places accountability where it is due: on interlocking, intergenerational, and present systems of oppression.

An example of systems-centered language includes saying a population is “systematically” affected by something rather than “disproportionately” affected by it (putting the onus on the system). Another would be to not say that a community is “at risk,” but “exposed to additional harm.”

*Avoid the passive voice*, especially when writing about people. Instead of saying an individual is “impacted by” something, ask yourself: Who or what is doing the “impacting”?

Code for America is committed to [diversity, equity, and inclusion](#) in both our workplace and in our work, and this commitment must also be reflected in how we write and speak about our work.

**Tl;dr: We often talk about treating the people we serve with dignity and respect, and these are also our goals when writing about them. When in doubt, be specific.**

## **Key terms about the people/populations we work with and serve**

- Use “**people**” or “**individuals**” when you are trying to be broadly generic.
- “The **public**” is a good choice when distinguishing from government.
- When writing about a person, use their proper pronouns; if you don’t know those, just use their name.
- Use “**resident**” \*\*\*\* or “**community member**” when talking about people from a specific locality. Do not use “**citizen**” unless it is specifically relevant to rights and privileges that are exclusively reserved for those with full citizenship, like voting or running for elected office. Citizenship is exclusive, and the word should only be used when referring to people who carry all the rights of citizenship.
- Avoid the word “**user**,” which implies a narrowness of that person’s identity only in relation to their interaction with a product or service.
- Use descriptive language to accurately represent the person or population you’re referencing. For instance, if you’re talking about people who use GetCalFresh to apply for CalFresh, you’d call them “**applicants**.” If you’re talking about someone who participates in a benefits program, you’d call them a “**client**.” If you’re talking about

people who have convictions on their record, you'd call them "**people living with convictions.**"

- People belonging to groups that have been intergenerationally and systemically excluded from opportunity and prosperity in this country due to institutional racism and other systemic barriers have been "**marginalized**" or "**systematically oppressed.**" Use these terms instead of "vulnerable," which has negative connotations when applied to a group of people. Avoid referring to people/populations as "historically" marginalized or oppressed, which implies that it is not happening today. If you are writing an issue that is current that has also been present throughout history, be specific: Has it been occurring for years? Decades? Centuries?
- "**Structural/systemic racism**" refers to the historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal policies or practices that routinely advantage white people while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for BIPOC.
- When people have directly depended on, been impacted by, or interacted with the systems we are working to change, we refer to them as people with "**lived experience.**"
- Be wary of how your language may work to "other" people or populations, or imply in any way that you are writing about "those people." Think critically about how you use words like "us" and "them."
- Be intentional about the way you use the word "**community**" or "**communities.**" Code for America Brigade volunteers work to improve people's lives in the "communities" they live in; calling all people of a given race a "community" can imply monolithic status.

## Words about people/communities to avoid

*Note: These words should be avoided in original writing from Code for America. These descriptors may be used in client quotes, and we should always honor the language our clients use about their own situations.*

- At-risk
- Benefits recipient
  - Similarly, do not talk about someone being "on" benefits
- Disadvantaged
- Historically (as in "historically marginalized")
- Minority

- Poor
- Setback
  - Or “bounce back,” or any term that puts the burden of hardship on the people experiencing it
- Struggling/struggling to make ends meet
- Underrepresented
- User
- Vulnerable

## **Age**

Don't reference a person's age unless it's relevant to what you're writing. If it is relevant, include the person's specific age, offset by commas.

- "The CEO, 16, just got her driver's license."

Don't refer to people using age-related descriptors like “young,” “old,” or “elderly.”

## **Disability**

Don't refer to a person's disability unless it's relevant to what you're writing. If you need to mention it, use language that emphasizes the person first: “she has a disability” rather than “she is disabled.”

When writing about a person with disabilities, don't use the words “suffer,” “victim,” or “handicapped.” “Handicapped parking” is OK.

Don't use the word “abled” in contrast to someone with disabilities.

## **Gender and sexuality**

Use “LGBTQ+” when referring broadly to people or communities whose gender identity/sexuality is not cisgender/heterosexual. Be more specific when possible, especially when referring to individuals.

Don't call groups of people “guys.”

Avoid gendered terms in favor of neutral alternatives, like “server” instead of “waitress” and “businessperson” instead of “businessman.”

Don’t refer to a person’s sexual orientation unless it’s relevant to what you’re writing about.

When writing about a person, use their preferred pronouns. If you’re uncertain, just use their name or the singular “they” pronoun.

**It’s okay to use the following words as modifiers, but never as nouns:**

- LGBTQIA
- LGBTQ+
- lesbian
- gay
- bisexual
- transgender
- trans
- queer
- gender non-conforming
- non-binary
- straight
- cis
- cisgender

**Don’t use these words in reference to LGBTQIA people or communities:**

- homosexual
- lifestyle
- preference

## **Employment status**

Don’t refer to a person’s employment status unless it’s relevant to what you’re writing. Do not use employment status as a generic modifier. Avoid phrases like “working poor” or “working immigrants;” if necessary, use “hardworking.”

Personalize workers by referring to them as people, parents, cooks, nurses, etc. Collectively, avoid “workers” or “low-wage workers.” Instead use “families”, “communities” or “families

earning less than X per year.” Avoid phrases like “the unemployed” or “gainfully employed” as they exclude socially necessary roles such as caregiving, or informal economy.

Use accurate, active statements when referring to a change in employment. For example, instead of “people who lost their jobs,” say “people who were laid off/fired by their employer” or “people who are forced to leave their jobs because of hard commutes and inconsistent childcare.”

Be explicit when employment status intersects with other areas such as housing, health, or retirement. For example “without paid family leave...”, “without employer-sponsored health insurance...”, “without workers compensation insurance...”, etc.

## **Housing status**

Don’t refer to a person’s housing status unless it’s relevant to what you’re writing.

Use “**people without housing**,” “**unhoused individuals**,” or “**people experiencing homelessness**” to refer to people without permanent and/or stable housing. Do not use “homeless” as an adjective.

## **Immigration status**

Don’t refer to a person’s immigration status unless it’s relevant to what you’re writing.

Use “**undocumented**” to refer to people who do not have the documents required for legal residence. Never use the word “illegal” or make any reference to someone living in this country “illegally.”

“**Mixed immigration status**” refers to when people in one household have different immigration statuses (i.e. undocumented, Green Card, citizenship, etc.)

## **Income and poverty**

Don’t refer to a person’s income or economic status unless it’s relevant to what you’re writing.

When writing about poverty, frame it as a collective/community issue that requires systemic reform, rather than an individual issue. For example, “America is failing to provide safety and stability for families.”

Ground your writing about people with low or no income in financial concerns that can impact all of us, such as raising children, caring for sick relatives, paying bills, etc.

Avoid game-based metaphors like “leveling the playing field” that suggest winners and losers. Instead, emphasize common goals, that people are stronger together, and share “ladders of opportunity.”

### **Words and phrases to use when writing about income and poverty:**

- Working hard to make ends meet
- Ensuring families have the resources they need
- People facing barriers
- People with low incomes
  - Similarly, families/residents with low incomes
- Low-income
- Low-wealth
- People whose incomes don’t meet basic needs
- Financial stability/health
- Economic opportunity
- Economic mobility
- Facing health/ educational/ etc. challenges due to poverty

### **Words to avoid:**

- Disadvantaged
- Independence (in the financial sense)
- Poor/poorest
- Struggling/struggling to make ends meet
- Vulnerable

## **Medical conditions**

Don’t refer to a person’s medical condition unless it’s relevant to what you’re writing.

If a reference to a person's medical condition is warranted, use the same rules as writing about people with physical disabilities and emphasize the person first. Don't call a person with a medical condition a "victim."

## Mental and cognitive conditions

Don't refer to a person's mental or cognitive condition unless it's relevant to what you're writing. Never assume that someone has a medical, mental, or cognitive condition.

Don't describe a person as "mentally ill." If a reference to a person's mental or cognitive condition is warranted, use the same rules as writing about people with physical disabilities or medical conditions and emphasize the person first.

## Race and ethnicity

Don't refer to a person's race or ethnicity unless it's relevant to what you're writing. When it is relevant, the adjective should precede a noun referring to people, not objects or places. For example, use "Black authors" or "literature about the experience of Black people" instead of "Black literature."

The following terms are guidance for when you are referring to a broader community of people. When you are writing about a local community, a family, or an individual, be as specific as possible and always follow their preference.

Use "**BIPOC**" (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) or "**people/communities of color**" when referring broadly to people or communities of races other than "white." When talking about just one group, be specific: "Chinese Americans" or "members of the Seminole Indian Tribe of Florida," for example.

Use "**Black**" as an adjective in a racial, ethnic, or cultural sense ("Black people," "Black communities," etc.). "**African American**" is also acceptable if it is the individual's preference. Note that the terms are not necessarily interchangeable.

Use "**East Asian American**," "**South Asian American**," or "**Southeast Asian American**" to refer to Americans of East Asian, South Asian, or Southeast Asian descent. Use a more specific identification when possible, such as "Filipino American" or "Vietnamese American."

Avoid the broad and imprecise word "brown" in racial, ethnic, or cultural references unless as part of a direct quotation. Interpretations of what the term includes vary widely.

Use “**Indigenous**” or “**American Indians**” to refer to indigenous peoples of North, Central, and South America. Use a specific tribal affiliation when possible, especially when referring to individuals, such as “Navajo” or “member of the Nisqually Indian Tribe.”

Use the gender-neutral “**Latinx**” to refer to people who are from—or whose ancestors were from—a Spanish-speaking land or culture. On an individual level, use “**Latino**” or “**Latina**” in accordance with their preferred pronouns. Use a more specific identification when possible, such as “Puerto Rican” or “Mexican American.”

Use “**Middle Eastern American**” to refer to Americans of Middle Eastern descent. Use a more specific identification when possible, such as “Iranian American” or “Azerbaijani American.”

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## Writing about our safety net work

### Key terms around Code for America’s safety net work

- **The social safety net:** A network of supports that aims to promote the health and wellbeing of children, adults, and seniors.
- **Public benefits:** The publicly-administered programs that make up the social safety net.
- **Human-centered safety net:** How we describe our vision for what the social safety net could look like. Read more in our [Blueprint for a Human-Centered Safety Net](#).
- **GetCalFresh:** Code for America operates this website that helps people in California through the CalFresh (SNAP, formerly known as "food stamps") application process.
- **The Integrated Benefits Initiative:** This program is a partnership with several other organizations that leverages technology and design to demonstrate how safety net systems can enable access, improve efficiency, and promote integrity.
- **GetYourRefund:** A free, digital tax service that connects tax filers with Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) partners and helps them get flexible cash in the form of tax credits they’ve earned.

### People-first safety net language

- We refer to people who are enrolled in benefits programs through our safety net services as “**clients.**” When people are in the process of applying for benefits, we refer to them as “**applicants.**”
- Try to be specific about the benefits program(s) you are writing about when possible. When writing about safety net programs more broadly, use language like “people who need access to the safety net,” “people who need food assistance,” or “people who participate in benefits programs.” We do not say that people are “on” benefits programs, which implies dependency.
- Use inclusive “**we**” language when broadly describing situations and circumstances that the safety net is meant to provide support through, such as “when we get laid off from jobs” or “when we don’t make enough money to afford both rent and groceries.”

## **Safety net programs that we work on, and related terms**

- **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP):** The federal food assistance program, formerly known as “food stamps.” The largest and most effective anti-hunger program in the nation.
  - **CalFresh: California’s name for SNAP**
  - **Food assistance: Another term that we often use in relation to our SNAP work**
- **Medicaid:** Free or reduced cost health insurance for individuals with low income.
- **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF):** Cash assistance and additional services for low-income families, formerly known as welfare. Programs vary significantly from state to state. Funding is block granted and there are limits on how long you can receive it.
- **Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP):** A program that assists eligible low-income households with heating and cooling energy costs, bill payment assistance, energy crisis assistance, weatherization, and energy-related home repairs.
- **Women Infants Children (WIC):** A public health nutrition program that supports women who are pregnant and children 0-5 years old.
- **The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC):** America’s largest tax credit program for low-income workers. In addition to the federal tax credit, many states offer their own EITC.
- **Community-based organizations (CBO)/ assisters:** We work with community-based organizations/partner agencies that support the benefits application process. These include but are not limited to food banks, social workers, welfare rights organizations, other nonprofits, etc.

- **Entitlement programs:** Programs for which the budget is not fixed. People who qualify based on the rules set forth by the government should receive benefits regardless of budgetary factors (eg. SNAP, Medicaid). This is immensely important because it allows programs to respond to downturns quickly.
  - **Block grants:** With block grants, a finite budget is set for the program. People may qualify under the guidelines without receiving support. This means there is more state control for how to administer. Block granted programs can't respond in times of greater need.
  - **Farm Bill:** The piece of legislation that determines funding and rules for SNAP (and all other agricultural programming, as well as other anti-hunger programming). It is renegotiated approximately every 4 years.
  - **Economic Impact Payment** aka **stimulus check:** These payments, authorized by the CARES Act, are intended to provide financial relief to qualifying individuals impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.
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## Writing about our criminal justice work

### Key terms around Code for America's criminal justice portfolio

- **Criminal legal system:** Interconnected legal systems that operate on the city, county, state, and federal level to enforce criminal laws (also known as penal statutes). The primary government institutions of the criminal legal system are the police, prosecution and defense lawyers, probation, parole, judges and the courts, state and federal prisons, and county jails. Each of these institutions have corresponding unions, which have differing levels of influence and power. There is a private sector ecosystem that also plays a role in the criminal legal system by providing services to the system, such as operating private prisons; providing probation services; selling surveillance and other law enforcement software, hardware, and other collateral; etc.
- **Criminal record:** A broad term for all of the information created about any contact you've had with the legal system. Can also be referred to as "**conviction history.**"
- **Record clearance:** An umbrella term used to describe the varying ways that records can be changed. This is the term we use to capture all types of legal remedies to change or shield an individual's criminal record. You should always clarify what a record clearance term means in a given state. There are no standard national definitions for "expungement" or "sealing" records.

- **Automatic record clearance:** This means that the government applies relief without an individual with a record needing to apply or take any action. Ideally, this process is done in as automated of a process as possible (i.e. with limited manual steps required on the government side of things as well).
- **Clean slate:** This term is both used to represent the idea of a “clear” record as well as the process of automatic record clearance policies which allow for the clearance of records. This phrase is used in varying ways, such as a person deserving a “clean slate” without the burden of a record, or “clean slate policies” that clear/expand opportunities to clear records.
  - Code for America is a member of **Clean Slate Initiative**, a national bipartisan coalition advancing policies to automatically clear all eligible criminal records across the United States.
- **Clear My Record:** Code for America’s initiative to promote automatic record clearance, with tools for people and tools for governments.
- **Clear My Record (classic):** The original and ongoing iteration of Clear My Record is a free, online tool that helps people with eligible convictions connect to attorneys who can help them navigate the complicated journey toward clearing their record.
- **ClientComm:** A two-way texting tool that Code for America built to promote better communication between community supervision caseworkers and their clients. It has now been handed off to government pretrial/probation agencies to manage on their own.

## People-first criminal justice language

- It is critical to refer to **people and communities who have been impacted by the criminal justice system** with language that reflects their full humanity rather than defines them by their contact with the criminal justice system. Some examples include “**people living with convictions**,” “**justice-impacted communities**,” “**individual with prior justice system involvement**,” or “**person who is incarcerated/currently serving a sentence/previously incarcerated/on parole/on probation**.”
- We never use words like “criminal,” “prisoner,” “inmate,” “offender,” “parolee,” “ex-convict,” “felon.” etc.
- “**Resident**” should replace “citizen,” especially in the phrase “returning citizen” that has been adopted by some to describe formerly incarcerated people. Citizens carry rights and responsibilities that many incarcerated people, formerly incarcerated people, undocumented people, and people without status do not have. Millions of people are legally denied the right to vote, the right to serve on a jury, the right to run

for an elected office, the right to travel freely, etc. Citizenship is exclusive and the word should only be used when intended to refer to people who carry all the rights of citizenship.

## Other relevant criminal justice terms

- **Rap sheet:** This form is the government's official version of an individual's criminal history via a list of a person's arrests and/or convictions. It can exist at different jurisdiction levels, i.e. state vs. city.
- **State criminal history repository:** A state agency that maintains comprehensive files of criminal history record information on people who have legal system involvement.
- **Court records:** Court records are public information and relate to court cases and activities that a person is involved within that particular court's jurisdiction (county, state, federal, or tribal). Court records are the source for most private background check companies. Court records exist for both the criminal and civil court systems.
- **Background check:** A background check is the process of looking up non-confidential information about someone's past activities, including their criminal history, work experience, education, debts, etc. Most commonly, background checks are done by private companies that specialize in investigating people and compiling information about them. Some jobs, opportunities, or licenses also require a fingerprint background check, which pulls information from the state criminal history repository as opposed to court records.
- **Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA):** This federal law regulates the collection of consumers' credit information and access to their credit reports. It requires background check companies, also known as consumer reporting agencies (CRA's) to comply with certain regulations to ensure that the background check process is done fairly.
- **Collateral consequences:** A term for legal and regulatory sanctions and restrictions that limit or prohibit people with criminal records from accessing employment, occupational licensing, housing, voting, education, and other opportunities. People with convictions face approximately 44,000 legal restrictions across the country that

are barriers to accessing jobs, housing, education, and more.

- **Conviction v. non-conviction:** “Convictions” refer to an official charge with a verdict and disposition made. “Non-convictions” refer to cases that ended in dismissals or an arrest that did not lead to a charge.
  - Non-convictions, including arrest and court records, include:
    - Acquittals
    - All dismissals, with and without prejudice
    - All arrests and cases where no charges were brought
    - Cases where the defendant successfully completed the terms of a deferred prosecution or diversion program
  - Conviction records include:
    - Traffic offenses, including those held by the motor vehicle registry
    - Municipal offenses, infractions, and summary offenses
    - Misdemeanors
    - Felonies
- **Eligibility/eligibility expansion:** What criminal history information is eligible to be cleared (with “cleared” being used in the broadest terms). Eligibility expansion means widening the scope of what convictions and people are eligible for record clearance.
- **Fines and fees:** “**Fines**” are monetary punishments for infractions, misdemeanors or felonies. “**Fees**” are itemized payments for court activities, supervision, or incarceration charged to the individual
- **Restitution:** A payment required as part as of some sentences, either to the party that was determined to have suffered some loss or a government body such as a victims compensation board
- **The War on Drugs:** A broad term used to encapsulate certain mass incarceration and foreign intervention policies of the US over the last half-century. Started in 1971 by President Richard Nixon and carried on by subsequent administrations of both parties, the War on Drugs included the criminalization of certain substances and the targeting of users and sellers of those substances by law enforcement. The War on Drugs is a primary reason the number of incarcerated people has expanded so dramatically since the 1970s. Black people and other BIPOC have been impacted

disproportionately by War on Drugs policies.

- **Mass incarceration:** A term that refers to the dramatic increase in incarceration in the US since the 1970s and the policies that created and maintain it. Policies such as the War on Drugs and “tough on crime” ideologies have contributed to mass incarceration, and they are enacted by federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. Mass incarceration is a broad term that encompasses prisons, jails, probation, and other ways that the criminal justice system removes justice-impacted people from society or places limits on their freedom.
- **Tough on crime:** An ideology that promotes aggressive policing, lengthy jail and prison sentences, and more as methods of “suppressing crime” and promoting “public safety.” This ideology advocates punishment for crimes rather than addressing their root causes. The term is often used by elected law enforcement officials to describe themselves, although this trend has waned in recent years.
- **Public safety:** A term that refers to an ideal state in which individuals and communities are not in danger.
  - It has traditionally been deployed by law enforcement officials to refer to their ideal state in which there is little to no property theft, interpersonal violence, or even “quality of life crimes” such as substance use and disorderly conduct. In this framing, crime and criminals are the dangers threatening the public safety of “law-abiding citizens.” Through that lens, the term has been used to justify mass incarceration and “tough on crime” policies.
  - More recently, advocates and reformers have pushed for a reimagining of what public safety means, looking to address root causes rather than using punishment to address what they view as symptoms. This view of public safety is closely related to the concept of “community health,” and in it the dangers threatening the public are often identified as poverty, institutional racism, economic inequality, barriers to opportunity, and other underlying societal ills. Rather than aggressive policing and incarceration, proposed solutions often include services like substance abuse harm reduction and treatment, mental health treatment, safety net programs, and community alternatives to violence intervention, along with affordable or free access to healthcare, education, and housing.

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## Writing about our Network program

- **Brigade** vs. **brigade**: We always capitalize the word "Brigade." This includes referring to the Code for America Brigade program, a group of Brigades, or when writing about a specific Brigade.
  - Code for Hawaii is a local **Brigade** based in Honolulu, HI. Code for America **Brigade** members are volunteers who come together to solve community problems.
- **Network** vs. **network**: We always capitalize the word Network when referring specifically to the Code for America Brigade Network. We lowercase it when talking about a broader network of people/supporters/organizations that share our vision for government in the digital age.
  - OpenOakland, Code for Tulsa, and Hack for LA are all volunteer groups in the Brigade **Network**.
  - The Knight Foundation is part of Code for America's **network** of supporters.
- **Community Fellowship**: We always capitalize "Community," "Fellow," and "Fellowship" when using the word(s) to refer to the Code for America program.
  - Each year, city partners are amazed by the simple, human-centered solutions that the **Fellows** create.
  - Ben Trevino was a 2018 Code for America **Community Fellow**.
  - The 2020 **Community Fellowship** will seek individuals with project-related lived experience.