

# Pronouns & Trans People

## VICTIM SERVICE PROVIDERS' FACT SHEET

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*A transman reported that a woman at a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community center, looking at the birth certificate he had produced to gain access to a program, insisted on calling him "she." He pointed out that "several" things about him had changed since that birth certificate was issued. To name but one example, he no longer weighed five pounds.*

We usually take pronouns – the small third-person words we use to refer to other people like "he," "her," and "theirs" – for granted. Still, nearly all of us are taken aback whenever someone refers to us by an incorrect pronoun. This is especially true for transgender and gender non-conforming people, who frequently view pronouns as indicative of whether the user is respecting their gender identity.

Most transgender people use pronouns we are most familiar with like "he" and "she," and usually dress and groom in alignment with our culture's gender expectations. However, there are exceptions. Some people are not able or do not want to align with binary gender stereotypes; if you determined/guessed these people's pronoun by their looks, you might not be right. For that reason, we advise asking all new clients what pronoun they use: "We know that some people have gender identities different from their appearance, so we ask everyone, 'What pronoun would you like us to use for you?'" You might need to explain what you mean to people who haven't thought much about their gender, but by doing so, you have alerted them to the fact that your agency serves people who may be gender non-conforming, knowledge that could help prevent later questions or conflicts.

A growing number of people are using pronouns that aren't linked to just one gender. Below is FORGE's conjugation chart of some of these gender neutral pronouns. This list, however, is not complete. If your new client says they use a pronoun you haven't heard before, it's fine to say "I want to make sure I get it right, can you repeat or write down how you spell your pronoun?"

Subjective	Objective	Possessive adjective	Possessive pronoun	Reflexive	Pronunciation
She	Her	Her	Hers	Herself	pronounced as it looks
He	Him	His	His	Himself	pronounced as it looks
Ze	Zim	Zir	Zirs	Zirself	pronounced as it looks
Sie/Zie	Hir	Hir	Hirs	Hirself	pronounced: zee, here, here, heres, hereself
Zie	Zir	Zir	Zirs	Zirself	pronounced: zee, zere, zere, zeres, zereself
Ey	Em	Eir	Eirs	Eirself	pronounced: A, M, ear, ears, earsself
Per	Per	Pers	Pers	Persself	pronounced as it looks
They	Them	Their	Theirs	Themself	pronounced as it looks

It is important to always use a person's preferred pronoun, even if they are not present. An exception to this may be in certain medical, employment, or familial settings where the person is known as another gender, and has requested you use a different name or pronoun in these settings. Because of widespread discrimination, some transgender people protect their safety and wellbeing by not disclosing they are transgender to some people, or they simply may still be known (such as by their health insurance company) by their old name and/or gender. If you suspect this might be the case, try to speak to your client privately ahead of time to clarify what name and/or pronoun they want you to use in a certain situation. If you are going to be advocating for a client with new providers, ask the client how they want you to handle it if the new provider uses the wrong pronoun. Some will want to correct the provider themselves. Others will welcome this advocacy, and still others will prefer to let incorrect pronouns slide by.

We all make mistakes, like using the wrong pronoun. What should you do when you make a mistake? Apologize as soon as you recognize the error, pledge to try not to repeat it, and then move on. Prolonged apologies make everyone uncomfortable, and you're better off returning your attention to providing needed services. However, if the client needs a more in-depth dialogue about what happened, be open to that discussion and listen carefully to their concerns and comments.

## Q & A

**Q: FORGE was recently asked this question: "I really don't want to sound judgmental; I am not...but I still don't get the use of plurals ["they" and "them"] to refer to one individual. I want to show the respect that any human being deserves, but it's just grammatically incorrect. If I asked to be called "Mrs. President" or "Your Majesty," would you feel obliged to do so? Must we assimilate any term out of respect or can we politely ask to use a gender neutral term or something that we can relate to as well?"**

*A: Language reflects our belief sets, and it can be hard to use language that violates our beliefs. What service providers in this situation need to ask themselves is, "Which do I value more: being grammatically correct, or connecting with and serving this victim?" When "Ms." first started being used, many objected to the term and insisted on calling women "Mrs." or "Miss" even if they preferred Ms. There have also been struggles over terms like "Black" and "African-American," "survivor" and "victim." You certainly can choose to debate language usage with your clients, but it is highly likely that a survivor seeking services will find that conversation alienating, disempowering, and even downright disrespectful. Many transgender people have walked out of service providers' offices unserved over just this kind of discussion, thinking to themselves, "If I have to fight over my own pronoun, there is no chance they are going to be able to hear and meet my other needs."*