

New Leash on Life USA
Statement on “Second Chances” Terminology

February 2, 2024

At New Leash on Life USA, we strive to be critically self-reflective, forward-thinking, and purposeful in our language. We have thus made a collective decision to no longer use the language of “second chances” to describe the opportunities our program provides to individuals involved in the criminal legal system and to at-risk dogs in local shelters. Instead, we believe “fresh starts” is a better description of the opportunities our program facilitates.

Despite its widespread use in public policy nationally and locally in Philadelphia, we find “second chances” to be misleading and problematic. The language implies that everyone had a legitimate *first* chance. We know that many people’s life “chances” are solely an accident of their birth; the neighborhood and family in which someone is born substantially mold their life course. We know many of our program participants may have lacked the financial resources and social capital necessary to have had a genuine first chance at success. Acknowledging the vastly disproportionate distribution of resources throughout our society leads us to affirm that not everyone has a real first chance.

We also seek to eradicate punitive attitudes toward animals who have been abandoned or surrendered to shelters, often after experiencing neglect, trauma, health challenges, or breed prejudice. As the hundreds of dogs we’ve rescued demonstrate, these animals are capable of tremendous resiliency and respond to the empathetic care that our participants provide. Our rescue dogs become valued, loved family members after receiving the proper medical care, training, and support through our program.

Additionally, the term “chance” implies an aspect of luck or gambling. While we recognize that a certain degree of luck can influence someone’s path through the criminal legal system (probation officer or judge assignments), the term “chance” removes individual agency from the equation. Our goal is for our participants to acquire skills and experiences that empower them to positively impact their own lives, and not leave their success up to chance. We prefer not to send the message that a person or dog only has a limited number of chances; we hope to provide endless opportunities by encouraging autonomy and ownership over one’s decisions and development.

Considering these problematic implications of “second chances,” we will now instead emphasize “fresh starts.” This language conveys a more positive and optimistic tone, suggests a new beginning, and invites an opportunity to build a better future. By emphasizing the potential for personal transformation and growth, “fresh starts” seeks to reduce the stigma associated with individuals involved in the criminal legal system and with dogs at highest risk for euthanasia while emphasizing the dignity and respect that every living being deserves. We also hope that “fresh starts” can foster a more supportive and inclusive community. It encourages people to welcome individuals and rescue animals with open arms, helping them reintegrate into society and succeed .

“Fresh starts” communicates the hope, potential, and power of our participants and rescue dogs to create a better life for themselves, their families, and our communities.

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