

Web Site Accessibility

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VLCT News • January 2003*

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Making your web site accessible to individuals with disabilities is an important part of your site design process. There are four laws that municipal web designers should be aware of: **Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), Section 255 of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1986 (amended in 1992 and again in 1998).**

The ADA requires that provisions be made to accommodate the disabled; state and local government and any places of “public accommodations” must furnish appropriate aids or services necessary for effective communication. A letter to Senator Tom Harkin from the U.S. Attorney General’s Office clarifies the issue of whether the Internet is subject to the ADA. It states that “covered entities under the ADA are required to provide effective communication, regardless of whether they generally communicate through print media, audio media, or computerized media such as the Internet.” (See <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/foia/tal712.txt> for the full text of the document.)

Section 255 of the Telecommunications Act states that any provider of telecommunications services must ensure that the service is accessible to disabled individuals. The Access Board, a federal agency responsible for issuing the rules and guidelines for accessibility, has produced many documents that explain the Telecommunications Act and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act in great detail. (See <http://www.access-board.gov/indexes/pubsindex.htm> under Communications.)

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act basically says that you cannot discriminate against a person with a disability by excluding them from participation in or denying them the benefits of any program or activity funded by federal dollars. This includes any instrumentality of a state or local government. (See <http://www.section508.gov> and click on “About 508” for detailed information.)

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act amends and clarifies Section 504 by specifically identifying electronic and information technology as a program or activity subject to nondiscrimination rules. This includes software and operating systems, web-based applications or information, and hardware of any type (phones, computers and peripherals, calculators and fax machines, etc.). Section 504 and 508 apply to state and local governments receiving any kind of federal aid. (See <http://www.section508.gov> and click on “About 508” for detailed information.)

The bottom line in all of this discussion is that local government has a legal obligation to provide access to persons with disabilities, and you should keep that in mind when you are designing a web site or contracting with a vendor to do so.

Content must be provided that can be understood by people with visual or auditory

impairment; images, animations, audio and video tracks should have a text equivalent that will convey the same information. Individuals who are visually impaired are unable to see graphic images and require text that is readable by screen reading devices. The use of frames, a web page layout technique, can prevent these devices from reading anything outside the frame. Color images, such as graphs, must be able to be understood without the color. If a bar graph, for instance, has various colored bars signifying different fiscal years, someone who is visually impaired will not be able to distinguish between the different bars, and therefore not understand the graph.

People with hearing impairments will need a way to understand any sound communicated on a web site, probably in a text format to convey the proper effect. For those with cognitive or neurological problems, inconsistent navigation, complex language, lack of sufficient illustrations, and flickering or strobing designs could cause the page to be unreadable. (See <http://www.w3.org/Talks/WAI-Intro/Overview.html>.) For each feature you include in your web site, consider how individuals with varying disabilities will be able to access it.

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), the international organization that sets standards for the web, issued “Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0” in May of 1999. (See <http://www.w3c.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT> for the latest guidelines.) This document includes 14 guidelines that will enhance accessibility. W3C uses the term “device independence,” meaning that any device used by an individual with a disability will be able to activate all elements of a web page.

Documents should also be clear and easy to navigate. This is a principle that can be used for web site accessibility for all users, disabled or not. Language should be clear and simple, and page layout consistent. Navigation bars and site maps should be designed to help the user to find information quickly. Again, consistency in your format is important in making your site as user friendly and accessible as possible.

To assist you in determining if your web site is accessible, a couple of tools are available online. “Bobby” (see link below in Resources) is a free tool that was created by CAST, a nonprofit organization that focuses on helping people with disabilities learn through computer technology. By typing a web address into “Bobby,” you can then run a “Bobby Scan” on the web site and return results that explain why the Web site is or is not compliant with W3C. “AskAlice” is another free online tool developed by Adobe and SSB Technologies that provides a similar service.

RESOURCES:

<http://bobby.watchfire.com/bobby/html/en/index.jsp>
<http://askalice.ssbtechnologies.com:8080/ssb/aa/anon/index.jsp>
<http://www.w3.org/>
<http://www.trace.wisc.edu/text/guidelns>
<http://www.webable.com/index.html>
<http://www.useit.com>