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ADA Accessible Websites for Public Entities

The following is primarily derived from the U.S. Department of Justice's *Accessibility of State and Local Government Websites to People with Disabilities* publication. The entire publication is available at https://www.ada.gov/websites2_prnt.pdf.

The Internet is changing the way American government serves the public. Taking advantage of technology, many local governments are using the web to offer citizens services including

- Corresponding with officials
- Providing information about government services
- Applying for or renewing registrations, licenses, or permits
- Accepting payments for taxes, recreational programs, or special activities
- Applying for jobs or benefits

If a local public entity receives Federal funding, the Americans with Disability Act generally requires the entity to provide qualified individuals with disabilities equal access to their programs, services, or activities unless doing so would fundamentally alter the nature of their programs or would impose an undue burden. One way to help meet these requirements is to ensure that their website has accessible features for people with disabilities.

Many citizens with disabilities use adaptive or assistive technology. People with vision impairments may use screen readers. Individuals who cannot manipulate a mouse may utilize voice recognition software to move the cursor using voice commands. New technology is introduced almost daily. Just as a poorly designed building can prevent someone with a disability from entering, so too can a poorly designed website present barriers to use. One example would be a photograph of a Mayor on the town website with no text identifying it. Because screen readers cannot interpret images unless there is a caption associated with it, a visually impaired person would have no way of knowing what the picture or image represents. Simply adding a line of hidden computer code to label the picture or image, will allow the user of the screen reader to make sense of the image.

When accessible features are built into web pages, websites are more convenient and more available to everyone – including users with disabilities. Web designers can follow techniques to make even complex web pages usable by everyone including people with disabilities. For most websites, implementing accessibility features is not difficult and will seldom change the layout or appearance of web pages. These techniques also make web pages more usable both by people using older computers and by people using the latest technologies.

Two important resources provide guidance for web developers designing accessible web pages. One is the *Section 508 Standards*, which Federal agencies must follow for their own new web pages. The Access Board maintains information about the Section 508 Standards on its website at www.access-board.gov and has a useful guide for web developers at www.access-board.gov/sec508/guide/1194.22.htm.

A more comprehensive resource is the *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines* developed by the Web Accessibility Initiative. Information for web developers interested in making their web pages as accessible as possible, including the current version of the *Guidelines* and associated checklists, can be found at www.w3c.org/WAI/Resources.

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It is important to also realize, even if your town, district or authority is not required to comply with the ADA Accessibility for Websites regulations, there are many benefits to upgrading your websites, and the costs are not typically significant.

A voluntary Risk Management Plan for Accessible Website is offered below:

- Establish a policy that your web pages will be accessible** and create a process for implementation.

 - Ensure that all new and modified web pages and content are accessible:**
 - Check the HTML1 of all new web pages. Make sure that accessible elements are used, including alt tags, long descriptions, and captions, as needed.
 - If images are used, including photos, graphics, scanned images, or image maps, make sure to include alt tags and/or long descriptions for each.
 - If you use online forms and tables, make those elements accessible.
 - When posting documents on the website, always provide them in HTML or a text-based format, even if you are also providing them in another format, such as Portable Document Format (PDF).

 - Develop a plan for making your existing web content more accessible.** Describe your plan on an accessible web page. Encourage input on improvements, including which pages should be given high priority for change. Let citizens know about the standards or guidelines that are being used. Consider making the more popular web pages a priority.

 - Ensure that in-house staff and contractors responsible for web page and content development are properly trained.**

 - Provide a way for visitors to request accessible information or services by posting a telephone number or E-mail address on your home page.** Establish procedures to assure a quick response to users with disabilities who are trying to obtain information or services in this way.

 - Periodically enlist disability groups to test your pages for ease of use;** use this information to increase accessibility.
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