



Unpacking the New Web Content Accessibility Guidelines

More than ever before, the internet has become the standard way of accessing information, performing required tasks, and participating in society in general. While many find this quick and convenient, it can be a struggle for those with disabilities. Thankfully, the Department of Justice (DOJ) has recently outlined regulations to ensure that everyone can use and navigate government websites effectively.

Here are answers to some important questions you may have about these new guidelines:

Who will this help?

The new regulations, which go into effect June 24, 2024, are set up to accommodate a variety of disabilities. From visual and hearing impairments to motor, cognitive, and neurological disabilities, the goal is for all government websites and online services to be accessible to everyone. Although there's no way to make a "perfect" website, these standards will make navigating government sites easier.

What kinds of standards are included?

The standards outlined in the new regulations are designed to create more inclusive digital environments. Some examples include:

Ensuring Compatibility:

Online content must be compatible with various assistive technologies, including screen readers and other tools that help users with disabilities navigate and interact with websites.

Text Alternatives:

All non-text content, such as images, videos, and audio, must have text alternatives to ensure that users with visual or hearing impairments can access the information.

Keyboard Accessibility:

Websites must be navigable and operable through keyboard-only input, accommodating users who cannot use a mouse.

Clear Structure and Navigation:



Websites should have a logical structure with clear headings, consistent navigation, and easily identifiable links and controls to aid users with cognitive disabilities. Furthermore, the content should be in simple language and free of difficult-to-understand legalese.

Accessible Forms:

Online forms must be accessible, with proper labels, instructions, and error messages to ensure users can complete and submit them without barriers.

Responsive Design:

Content must be accessible across different devices and screen sizes, including mobile phones and tablets, ensuring a consistent experience for all users.

Will there be exceptions?

Special considerations and exceptions to the guidelines have been established. While the rule goes into effect in June 2024, municipalities with a population of 50,000 or more will have until April 2026 to comply. Areas that have less than 50,000 people will have an extra year to make necessary updates. There are also five instances where the new regulations will not be enforced:

- Archived content: Documents, reports, and other web content that is not intended for current use.
- Conventional file formats: Older PDFs or documents that predate the ADA guidelines and are no longer in use.
- Third-party content: Any content posted by a third party, such as external links or comments. This does not apply to content that was contracted out or requested.
- Individualized, password-protected, or otherwise secured conventional electronic documents: Databases or classified information where accessibility modifications could compromise security or privacy are excluded. However, accommodation requests can be made for individuals needing help with their personal accounts (billing, statements, etc.).
- Preexisting social media posts: Any social media posts published before the regulations went into effect.



While these exceptions provide general guidance for enforcing the new regulations, details and questions will need to be worked out as they arise.

These regulations set the foundation for our expectations as a country that electronic content, particularly official content related to public services and healthcare services, be accessible to people with disabilities.

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Which government websites will be affected?

The DOJ's accessibility guidelines apply to any state and local government website, including city councils, public and community services, public schools, public colleges and universities, utilities, judicial and law enforcement online services, and more.

In conjunction with the DOJ regulations, the Department of Health and Human Services is expected to release similar regulations to ensure public health departments, hospitals, clinics, social services, and welfare programs have equally accessible websites.

The ADA has promised equal participation in society, and the new accessibility guidelines are an exciting step toward fulfilling that promise. The government has recognized that the ADA's role needs to evolve with society and has now established the expectation that important electronic content is accessible to all.

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