United States Senate Special Committee on Aging

"Unlocking the Virtual Front Door: Ensuring Accessible Government Technology for People with Disabilities, Older Adults, and Veterans."

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Testimony of Ashley Lichtle, ADA Coordinator, Salt Lake City Mayor's Office

Hello members of the committee, my name is Ashley Lichtle. I would like to thank Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Braun, their teams, and the other members of the committee for the opportunity to discuss accessibility of web information for governmental entities. This has been a top initiative of mine as the ADA Coordinator for Salt Lake City since I joined the Mayor's Office in 2021 so I am honored to be here with you all today. Prior to my work in Salt Lake City, I worked with people with disabilities throughout Arkansas where I saw the impact the lack of access to web information and digital spaces had during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was and continues to be very isolating for people.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rush to go virtual revealed that most functions of daily life were easily able to be digital (whereas previously there had been a general resistance toward remote work as an accommodation), but more importantly, it exposed just how inaccessible much of our world wide web is and the difficulties of navigating digital spaces when improperly designed or designed without the user experience in mind.

The COVID-19 pandemic also revealed how vital, and sometimes lifesaving, it is that all people have equal access to information from their federal, state, and local governments. Governments have utilized digital spaces to provide pertinent information and as a means of engaging with the public for decades, yet still fall short in providing fully accessible digital spaces, including websites, utility portals, documentation systems, and social media accounts.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) greatly influenced the inclusion of people with disabilities in the built environment but there remains a large gap of inaccessibility in digital spaces. Governmental entities need regulations and guidance for their web content just as the ADA and ensuing Standards provided for the built environment. Governmental entities want to be accessible to and inclusive of their residents, but unlike stairs or narrow walkways, inaccessible features of websites and other digital spaces are invisible to those who do not rely on them unless they have been trained to seek out and remedy these barriers to access.

Salt Lake City's Efforts

Website Migration and Third-Party Apps

Salt Lake City currently uses a standard content management system for our websites. I have found this system's templates are often inaccessible with little ability to adjust template features. The City is migrating to a composable architecture system that will allow for greater flexibility and more agility in preventing and fixing any accessibility issues in our website. It will also create a uniform template across departments that will function the same throughout the City. This template will be created to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 to begin with an accessible platform. This migration will also allow the City to utilize application programming interfaces (API's) from other local apps to build what our residents and visitors need to navigate our digital and physical spaces more independently.

This move away from some third-party app developers is vital to the engagement of people with disabilities in our city. Recently, I worked with the City's Information Management Services (IMS) team, a low-vision resident and Salt Lake City's Accessibility and Disability Commission Chair, who is a blind individual, to go through our city's request app to identify ways the app was inaccessible to them. With that information, the IMS team and I met with the third-party app developer to review the identified issues. The developer informed us that some issues were well known to them and would not be fixed in any upcoming updates. Therefore, this app would remain inaccessible to the resident and others like him.

We can create an accessible user experience with our new website and affiliate apps through our partnerships with the National Federation of the Blind of Utah and the Utah Division of the Blind and Visually Impaired and through the expertise of Salt Lake City's Accessibility and Disability Commission but having implementation guidance from the federal government would further improve the design and development of these spaces.

Social Media and Civic Engagement

We utilize social media as a tool to spread pertinent updates widely and quickly to the public. I help all content creators in the City to understand the importance of applying WCAG 2.1 to social media posts, ensuring all users can perceive the same information. For example, individuals using the pedestrian right of way want to be informed of impacts to their routes to plan accordingly, much like drivers would. Therefore, it is vital for our content creators to ensure content posted about events, construction or other closures can be perceived by all users, including those using image descriptions and alt text, rather than only users who can see text on an infographic or sign.

Designing digital content with all users in mind is also crucial for civic engagement. We frequently use digital surveys to get public feedback on current and upcoming projects throughout the City. Engaging different demographics is crucial to the success of projects in the City because such engagement ensures a robust and representative dataset. Lengthy, complicated, or inaccessible screen reader surveys prevent people from engaging, decreasing the validity and inclusivity of our results. Our Civic Engagement team collaborates with me to review accessibility before surveys are released to the public. The team is also compiling a style guide for creating engaging and inclusive surveys.

People with disabilities have been underrepresented in civic engagement efforts or entirely prevented from participation throughout history. Therefore, utilizing WCAG 2.1 in digital surveys and other digital engagement content is vital for the inclusion and participation of our residents with disabilities. We value the contributions of and feedback from the disabled community in improving our city and work to make sure our content reflects those values.

NPRM on Accessibility of Web Information and Services

Data shows on average people with disabilities make up roughly 25% of the population. This is a significant amount of people that may not be able to perceive, interact with, or understand the digital content governments create, which can result in frustration, lack of engagement, and, at the very worst, feelings of isolation. Adopting WCAG 2.1 would be a much-needed step towards the full participation and independence of people with disabilities.

It is imperative that entities understand how to comply with WCAG 2.1 so I urge the Department of Justice, US Access Board, and ADA National Network to be diligent in creating technical guidance, especially plain language guides and trainings, for entities as they implement these regulations.

It is exciting to discuss the adoption of WCAG 2.1 with the vivid memories of the challenges in pivoting to a virtual world still impressed upon us. Adopting WCAG 2.1 will undoubtedly change how creators and engagement teams design content and how web accessibility is discussed and implemented in classrooms.

Thank you all for your work on this vital effort for inclusion.

Respectfully,

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