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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Good morning, Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Braun, and Members of the Senate Special Committee on Aging.

I am a blind Pennsylvanian serving as the Secretary for the Board of Directors of the Roads to Freedom Center for Independent Living of North Central PA. I also am President of the National Federation of the Blind of Pennsylvania Deaf-Blind Division. I also work in the field of web accessibility as an accessibility engineer for a company called Allyant.

So, I deal with accessibility issues on a daily basis, both personally and professionally.

While the Covid pandemic has increased reliance on technology for everyone, it has also amplified the need to make websites and other technologies accessible to all people due to its increased importance. Government websites, especially, must be accessible so that all constituents at all levels of government have access to programs, services, and information.

For example, imagine not being able to file your local taxes online. This is the situation I faced simply because I have a disability. When I went to the county website to pay my taxes on-line, I couldn't because I couldn't find the button used to submit the form. This ultimately forced me to seek sighted assistance to perform a task that everyone else can perform independently. Being forced to use sighted assistance means that I have to reveal private and sensitive information to someone else, something a sighted person would never have to do.

I have also tried to use our city's website, but I don't think I am getting all of the information as the links all announce there is a submenu that I cannot access. This could result in missing key local services.

There are also examples of non-government websites that are not accessible and create everyday problems for disabled people. I have had to switch banks because the app I relied upon to perform transactions was updated and made inaccessible. This resulted in much lost time and productivity as I had to move money from one institution to the other, set up direct deposits, and set up bill payments. Updating an app and not making it accessible in this day and age should be completely unacceptable.

There are many other activities, such as shopping, transportation, and tickets purchasing, when technology accessibility is important. People with disabilities need to be able to perform the same tasks as our nondisabled peers when it comes to work, recreation, and community living. But how do we get there?

To make government websites accessible, we must embrace standards such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). WCAG is an industry standard. Having WCAG as the standard for government websites will provide a clear standard for those responsible for creating and overseeing websites and technology. We must also recognize that accessibility is not a one and done deal but is always changing due to advances in technology and changes in website software.

To ensure that government websites and technology are accessible, people with disabilities need to be involved in the development of the websites and the monitoring of the websites to ensure they remain accessible. One strategy for ensuring accessibility is to have

people with disabilities, in conjunction with nondisabled advocates and peers, test and monitor websites and technology together. At Allyant, we perform what is called "paired auditing" where a native screen reader user is paired with a sighted auditor. This helps ensure that the disabled are getting an equitable experience to non-disabled users and ensures possible barriers to accessibility are identified for all types of disabilities, not just blind people.

Because of my disabilities and my job, I come across many issues related to accessibility and inaccessibility of website and technology. Some of the issues I see on a daily basis include unlabeled form fields which can leave blind people unsure what information is being asked for, unlabeled images which lead blind people to be unsure what is on a webpage, and buttons that are coded in such a way that they do not announce that they are actionable, thus leaving disabled people unaware of what function the button performs.

Local, state, and federal governments need regulations to ensure accessibility and that keep up with the changing pace of technology. We also need to ensure that disabled people are involved in the development of those regulations, the monitoring and oversight, the purchasing of software and other technology—really every step of the process of using technology. And we also need to make sure those regulations are enforced.

For people like me, and really for all Americans, accessibility needs to become just another part of doing business. Accessibility must be considered from the design phase, all the way through the process of implementing and maintaining a website. That is how we make government technology and all technology accessible.

Again, thank you for your time and I hope my testimony and expertise can move us closer to a world that is accessible to all.