

Casey Highlights Need to Monitor Accessibility of Federal Technology

Today, U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging Chairman Bob Casey (D-PA) spoke to the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency (CIGIE) about the need to increase oversight of federal technology to ensure it is accessible for people with disabilities, older adults and veterans. The speech followed a Senate Aging Committee Majority Staff report, [Unlocking the Virtual Door](#), that found widespread failure across the federal government to ensure the accessibility of federal technology.

Senator Casey's remarks, as prepared for delivery, follow below:

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with the Council of Inspectors General about the importance of incorporating accessibility into the work of the Nation's independent watchdogs.

You all play a vital role in moving the federal government toward better compliance with disabilities laws.

Doing so will help ensure 61 million Americans with disabilities have an equal opportunity to work in government and access the information and services provided by our federal agencies.

I want to thank several people for making my time with you possible:

- *The Council's chair, Mark Greenblatt, the Interior Department's inspector general;*
- *The Council's vice chair, Tammy Hull, the U.S. Postal Service's inspector general;*
- *And Doug Holt, on the Council's staff.*

I also want to thank you and your staffs for your work.

As a former Auditor General, I have a great respect for the work you do.

The words “all public service is a trust, given in faith and accepted in honor” are inscribed over the Finance Building in Harrisburg—a principal that has guided my work and embodies your roles as inspectors general.

Your dedication to rooting out waste, fraud, and abuse is among the most important jobs in the government.

As Chair of the Special Committee on Aging, one of my priorities has been elevating the voice of people with disabilities, who are too often overlooked in our Nation.

Physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities affect people of all ages, from birth to old age.

However, people experience disabilities more frequently as they age. And our population is rapidly aging: there will be 80 million people over the age of 65 by 2040—twice the number as in the year 2000.

These demographic shifts demand that the federal government step up its efforts to make its information and services accessible for people with disabilities.

It is not just the right thing to do, it’s the law.

Twenty-five years ago, Congress updated one of the Nation’s cornerstone disability laws to require that federal electronic and information technology be made accessible for people with disabilities.

In recent years, I have worked with my Democratic and Republican colleagues to examine progress toward meeting the requirements of that law, known as Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

That oversight uncovered dismal rates of compliance across the federal government, locking people out of jobs, information, and services.

For example, take Ron Biglin of Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania.

Mr. Biglin is a blind Air Force veteran who can fish, kayak, conduct online banking, read the news on his computer, and send emails.

But until my office intervened, the screen reader issued to him by the Department of Veterans Affairs did not work with VA's online health portal.

Beyond being denied easy access to his medical records, VA's lack of accessibility affected his independence.

Unfortunately, Mr. Biglin is not alone.

In December, I released an investigation showing how inaccessible federal technology is affecting people with disabilities, older adults, and veterans.

That report, called Unlocking the Virtual Front Door, found inaccessible technology has persisted partly due to insufficient oversight and enforcement.

First, Congress has not done a good job overseeing Section 508 compliance.

Second, for 10 years, the Department of Justice failed to issue statutorily mandated Section 508 reports that should have been published every two years.

And finally: the Office of Management and Budget and the General Services Administration collected compliance data—but it was not made public.

As a result, Congress and the public were in the dark, departments and agencies were left to police themselves, and accessibility remained a challenge.

The good news is that my oversight prompted the Justice Department to release its first Section 508 report since 2012, and the General Services Administration just published years of compliance data.

The bad news is the data confirmed my concerns about accessibility barriers.

Of additional concern is that these data only look at federal websites, while Section 508 requires all electronic and information technology to be accessible.

There is clearly more work to do.

Failing to ensure federal technology is accessible puts tens of millions of people in this Nation at a disadvantage—

It discriminates against people with disabilities seeking access to information like the weather, health insurance, and Veterans benefits.

And it discriminates against people with disabilities by barring them from equal access to employment at the Nation's largest employer.

Inaccessibility is also costing taxpayers money.

My oversight found VA contracts did not properly incorporate Section 508 requirements, which resulted in accessibility barriers and costly fixes.

The federal government has an obligation—a duty—to ensure accessibility.

Each of you, as inspectors general, can shine a spotlight on issues and bring about meaningful change at federal departments and agencies.

And your work has the potential to change millions of people's lives for the better—people like Ron Biglin.

Today, Mr. Biglin is able to access his health records after VA made the necessary fixes to its online portal.

I understand the VA's Inspector General is auditing the Department's Section 508 compliance, which should push VA toward more accessible technology across the board.

Inspectors general can play that critical role to ensure people with disabilities have equal access to jobs, services, and information across the federal government.

Advocates frame it this way: we would not ask someone using a wheelchair to walk up the courthouse steps.

Yet, the government does something similar every time it asks people with disabilities to use inaccessible federal websites, mobile apps, and other technology.

As the people charged with holding the government accountable, I hope you will use your oversight powers to break down barriers to accessibility.