

U.S. SENATOR BOB CASEY



CHAIRMAN Special Committee on Aging

Chairman Bob Casey's Opening Statement
“Unlocking the Virtual Front Door: Ensuring Accessible Government Technology for
People with Disabilities, Older Adults, and Veterans”
September 21, 2023

The hearing will come to order. Thank you to our witnesses and I know I was running a little late, so I did not get an opportunity to greet our witnesses. Thank you for being here and grateful to be here with Ranking member Braun.

This month marks the 50th anniversary of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1973. When they became law, these amendments prohibited discrimination on the basis of disability by the federal government, in federally funded programs, and by federal contractors. With the passage of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments, the federal government made it a priority to ensure that every person has access, access to government programs and services. It also established the foundation for the Americans with Disabilities Act, passed some 17 years later. Since the passage of this so-called Rehab Act, technology has become an important doorway to government services at the local, state, and federal levels.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed us again the importance of using websites and apps as a way to access government programs, services, and information. Last year, this Committee examined the compliance, or I should say examined compliance of one part of the Rehabilitation Act – Section 508, which requires federal technology to be accessible for, and usable by, people with disabilities.

One of our witnesses, Jule Ann Lieberman of Devon, Pennsylvania, testified that she could not access CDC's COVID data. Jule Ann told us at that time, “in crisis times, all need access to trusted information and services.” That is true for federal agencies. It is equally important for state and local governments that provide critical services, especially those related to safety and emergency response.

In December of this past year, I released this report. The name of it is *Unlocking the Virtual Front Door*. This report found accessibility problems with technology at the Department of Veterans Affairs and unfortunately throughout the federal government. I am pleased that, because of bipartisan efforts with members on this Committee and throughout Congress, some, some improvements have been made.

The Veteran's Administration reorganized its technology access office and bolstered its efforts to make VA technology accessible. The Justice Department and the General Services Administration committed to new oversight and transparency of accessible federal technology. Many Inspectors General are also taking a new look at accessibility. For example, the VA Office of Inspector General plans to release a report on the accessibility of VA technology in the coming months. And we've seen progress to improve accessibility of state and local government resources: in early August, the Department of Justice issued a proposed rule setting website and technology accessibility standards for local and state governments.

These long overdue proposed standards are necessary to ensure people who are blind, deaf, have physical disabilities, or intellectual disabilities can access programs, services, and information provided by local and state governments. So, I commend the Justice Department for issuing these proposed rules, I know that the public will help strengthen them, and look forward to the final rule to make all, all government technology more accessible for all Americans.

These are positive steps, I should say there are more, there is more work we to do, there are positive steps we can in Congress can take. Recently I worked with Senator Rick Scott to introduce the Veterans Accessibility Act. Our legislation would create a VA advisory committee to oversee VA's compliance with all accessibility laws. People with disabilities would serve on the committee, providing important feedback. And today, a number of senators and I will introduce the Federal Agency Accessibility Compliance Act. Our bill would bolster the role of Federal Section 508 compliance officers in federal agencies, require agency and department heads to personally certify, certify that their organizations' technology is accessible, and, to post plans and timelines if their agency technology is not accessible. These bills are common sense legislation designed to ensure federal government services, programs, and communications are accessible to all Americans. So, we have much more work to make websites and technology at all levels of government accessible or I might add, fully accessible.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about how we can accomplish that goal. I will now turn to Ranking Member Braun for his opening comments.