

U.S. SENATOR BOB CASEY



CHAIRMAN Special Committee on Aging

Chairman Bob Casey's Opening Statement
“Click Here: Accessible Federal Technology for People with Disabilities, Older Americans, and Veterans”
July 28, 2022

The hearing will come to order. Thank you everyone for being here this morning. I'll start with my opening, then I'll turn to Ranking Member Scott. This week marks the 32nd anniversary of the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act. As we commemorate that anniversary, our Committee will examine an important disability issue: how to improve the accessibility of federal information technology for people with disabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a long-term shift in delivering government services using virtual front doors instead of physical front doors. Unfortunately, over the years, the U.S. government has not prioritized making these virtual front doors accessible to people with disabilities, most recently. Digital access significantly affects older Americans and veterans, who experience disabilities at higher rates than the general population and more frequently use these government services.

Federal law requires, requires, Executive Branch agencies make their technology accessible to people with disabilities. However, bipartisan oversight that I've led shows the U.S. government is falling short on digital accessibility. I want to thank Ranking Member Scott and our Aging Committee colleague Senator Burr for joining me in these oversight efforts. In 2018, my office heard from veterans who have a disability or more than one disability, who reported problems accessing the Department of Veterans Affairs' websites and kiosks. In response, I worked alongside Senator Jerry Moran to pass the bipartisan VA Website Accountability Act (S. 3587) in 2020. That law required the VA to report on the accessibility of its websites and intake kiosks. The resulting report had stark findings—fewer than 10 percent of its websites were fully accessible as of last fall and the Department's plans to fix them were inadequate. My understanding is that the VA will soon be responding to a letter I sent with Senator Scott and other colleagues regarding longstanding accessibility shortfalls with the Department's technology. I'll be reviewing those plans and look forward to working with the Department to address these long-standing issues.

While serious, the VA's accessibility shortfalls are not unique. A long list of agencies and even the White House, have settled lawsuits in recent years alleging their websites and technology are not accessible. That's why I am concerned that the Department of Justice has not evaluated federal technology access for a decade. Federal law requires these evaluations every two years.

The Biden Administration has rightfully prioritized improving digital access, but years of inattention to accessibility means there still a lot of work to do. Someone who just happens to live in the same county I live in, his name is Ron Biglin and I'm holding up a letter, some of which I've highlighted. Ron Biglin, he lives in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania, not too far from Scranton has suffered from this inattention. He submitted a statement for the hearing record, I'll make that statement part of the record. Ron Biglin is an Air Force veteran, who is blind. He can fish, kayak and do online banking, but the VA's My Healthy Vet site does not work with his screen reader, making him unable to use it. Ron wrote an important part in his statement: "When you are visually impaired you want to be as independent as possible and having problems getting on VA websites takes away this independency. ... If the VA could lead the way to make access easier, this would be a great plus and then also other government agencies could do the same."

Couldn't have said it any better than Ron Biglin said it. We wouldn't ask someone using a wheelchair to walk up the courthouse steps. But we do something similar when we ask people with disabilities to use federal websites, were saying that all the time and thankfully it's worked for a lot of Americans. But when we're telling people to use these federal websites, mobile apps and other technology that are inaccessible, that makes no sense. We've got to do better than that as a federal government and as a society. I thank our witnesses for being here today and look forward to hearing how to address these issues for people with disabilities, for seniors and for veterans across the country like Ron Biglin. I will now turn to Ranking Member Scott.