Access Ready Local and State Government

When the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) was enacted in 1990, the Internet as we know it today did not exist as the ubiquitous infrastructure for information and commerce. Neither did the information technology-driven workplace. Today the Internet and information and communications technology (ICT) plays a critical role in the daily, personal, professional and civic life of Americans. This also encompasses more and more; how local and state government does business.

Access Ready INC. is an independent, non-profit, cross-disability education and advocacy organization promoting a policy of inclusion and accessibility of information and communications technology (ICT). Access Ready's strategies include technical findings, policy discussions, best practices, and

advocacy efforts made available to the public through www.accessready.org, its social media stream, and other public relations efforts.

Access Ready asks the question, "If physical facilities in this country must be built in accordance with accessibility standards, why not information and communications technology?" Businesses, employers, and federal, state, and local governments are becoming increasingly dependent on information and communications technology to provide goods and services. For people with disabilities, accessible information and communications technology is a necessity, not a luxury or a convenience, which fosters independence, economic self-sufficiency, and active, meaningful participation in civic life.

What is an Access Ready Environment?

An access Ready Environment is where access for people with disabilities at the physical and technological levels is a matter of forethought,

design, inclusion and planning instead of a condition of afterthought, delay and discrimination resulting in risk to all concerned.

Increasingly, many public state and local government entities covered under Title II of the ADA are using websites to provide public access to their programs, services, and activities. To support these activities the internal or and employee- facing operations of government are also driven by information and communications technology (ICT).

Without addressing the accessibility of both their internal and external ICT, government entities cannot meet their responsibilities to inform, employ, and serve the approximately 25% of Americans who have disabilities.

The recent COVID pandemic brought this home to millions in very stark ways. When we were all told to go home to live, work, learn, teach, shop and vote many people with disabilities found

the inaccessibility of websites and other ICT based services severely limited their ability to participate.

An Access Ready Environment Policy is intended to advance accessibility across the web and ICT.

Title II of the ADA requires state and local governments to ensure that their communications, including those via the internet and ICT, are equally effective for people with disabilities as for people without disabilities. Equally effective communication generally means people with disabilities can access or acquire the same information, engage in the same interactions, and enjoy the same products and services that the government's communications offer its non-disabled participants with substantially equivalent ease of use. To be effective, accessible communications must be provided in a timely manner, and in such a way as to protect the privacy and independence of the

individual with a disability. These requirements apply to both communications the state or local government makes to members of the community and communications it receives from the community.

In the age of paper-and-pencil documents and in-person or telephone communications, this generally meant providing large print, taped texts, and Braille formats for documents, and using sign language interpreters, relay services, and captioning for meetings and telephone calls. As we have entered the age of internet- and ICT-based communication, however, accessible formats have also moved online.

By making a website or online document or video accessible (i.e., screen readable, usable without a mouse, and captioned), a state or local government can make its communications accessible without having to create separate accessible versions. If a website or online document or video is not accessible, on the other hand, the government

will have to maintain a separate system for communicating with people with disabilities which is likely to fail to comply with the ADA's requirement of equally effective communication.

Many of the websites and the information and communications technology (ICT) used in the offices of and by state and local government agencies render use by individuals with disabilities difficult or impossible due to barriers imposed by the technology which does not work with the adaptive technology available to people with disabilities. Like curb ramps to sidewalks, building bridges between the standard ICT and the assistive technology used by people with disabilities is accomplishable and necessary to allow people with disabilities to access the systems that are foundational to our workplaces and civic spaces. Also, like curb ramps, these bridges benefit everyone - with and without disabilities.

A government that embraces an Access Ready policy can accomplish this over reasonable budget cycles without real difficulty.

Being unable to access websites and ICT puts individuals with disabilities at a great disadvantage in today's society, which is driven by a dynamic electronic service delivery model. The Access Ready Environment is one where website and information and communications technology accessibility is designed in from the outset and is not an afterthought as it is so often today.

For many, it is now difficult to imagine a world without the unprecedented access to information that the web provides. The Internet is dramatically changing the way that governmental entities serve their constituents. Why would it be acceptable not to provide such access to people with disabilities? No other minority would stand for such limitations and society would not allow such a thing.

Public entities are increasingly providing their constituents access to government services and programs through their websites. By adopting an Access Ready Environment policy government can achieve and maintain accessibility on the web and through their ICT. Becoming accessible is only the beginning. without policies in place to maintain it, the effort is wasted.

Through government websites, the public can obtain information or correspond with local officials without having to wait in line or be placed on hold. They can also pay fines, apply for benefits, renew State-issued identification, register to vote, file taxes, request copies of vital records, and complete numerous other everyday tasks. The availability of these services online not only makes life easier for the public, but also enables government to operate more efficiently and cost effectively.

For government to ignore people with disabilities as a constituency for goods and

services is a tremendous mistake. How can it be acceptable to deny access to people with disabilities, a minority group that now includes over twenty-five percent of the general population, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

An Access Ready Environment policy moves government in the right direction.

People with disabilities represent a vast untapped talent pool ready to join the workforce and to serve their communities, but unemployment and underemployment of people with disabilities remains unacceptably high. Given the rehabilitation funding spent by the government, it is ridiculous not to seek out qualified individuals with disabilities.

Again, the COVID pandemic has pushed forward the need for employees who can and want to work from home. This is a perfect scenario for workers with disabilities in this employee deprived recruitment environment.

Unemployment leaves people with disabilities relying on government benefits, even while their communities need their talents and skills.

Too often, once an employer hires a person with a disability, they find that their technology is not sufficiently accessible to allow the person to do their work to their best ability.

What is needed is the adoption of an Access Ready Policy that applies to ICT across the environment. An Access Ready Policy helps state and local governments find, adopt and maintain accessible technology that includes all their citizens, makes the most of all their talent, and reduces the need for redundant ad hoc workarounds. The promise of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to provide an equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities to participate in and benefit from all aspects of American civic and economic life will be achieved in today's technologically advanced society only if the local and state governments

recognize that their ICT systems must be accessible and take action to make it so.

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