

A gap in Web access

As states offer government services via the Internet, they need to make sure people with disabilities can access their Web sites.

BY ED JANAIRO

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The digital divide is not just one between those who “have” and those who “have not.” There is also the growing gap between those who “can” and those who “cannot.”

As more state agencies are starting to deliver public services over the Internet, there is a growing concern that only residents who can afford the technology will be able to fully benefit and those lacking the means will be left out. But even when computers are widely available, a gulf will remain between those who can use them for access to public services and those who cannot because of physical disability.

Barriers to access

The design of many government Web sites makes it difficult for many Americans with disabilities to benefit from public services over the Internet or e-government. This is particularly true for those



with vision or hearing impairments. People with vision problems use software that reads aloud text on a Web page. As Web technology becomes more sophisticated and Internet connections faster, Web sites are conveying more information by using pictures, charts, maps, animation and video. Screen-reading software, however, cannot translate these graphic images. As a result, a user with impaired vision runs into a wall when trying to use these Web-based services.

“When blind people use the Internet and come across unfriendly sites, we aren’t surfing, we are crawling,” a user was quoted in a recent *New York Times* article. “It is like trying to use Netscape with your monitor off and the mouse unplugged.”

Moreover, hearing-impaired people will suffer as streaming audio is used more widely on government sites. As people with disabilities ask for more accessible e-government services, states are revamping their Web sites and adopting stringent guidelines to ensure they reach out to as many constituents as possible.

Making services accessible

Connecticut’s ConneCT Management Advisory Committee, for example, requires that state Web sites meet accessibility standards set forth by an international body that helps establish Internet standards, the World Wide Web Consortium. Among other things, these standards demand that an agency’s Web site uses a consistent layout and navigation buttons on all its pages, avoids excessive pictures and graphics and uses background and text colors with sufficient contrast so people with color deficits can clearly see the text. Also, a Web site should have an alternative text-only site that is easily translated by screen-reader software and any picture or graphic image should have text describing the content of the image. To assist the hearing impaired, captioning of all audio and video clips can be accomplished

by closed-captioning or “CC” hyperlinks.

Standards for techniques that enhance a Web-site’s accessibility can be found at the World Wide Web Consortium’s site. These standards set forth three priority categories for Web access. Priority 1 techniques address Web-page features that, if not used, then the Web page is considered “impossible” for certain groups of people to access. If Priority 2 techniques are not used, then the Web page is “difficult” to access and if Priority 3 techniques are not used, then the page is “somewhat difficult” to access.

The Center for Applied Special Technology, a nonprofit educational organization that seeks to expand opportunities for the disabled through the use of technology, provides a free Web-based service that can analyze a Web-page’s accessibility. The analysis indicates where a site fails to meet the World Wide Web Consortium’s standards for accessibility. A recent review of state government home pages using this accessibility analyzer revealed that at least 20 states do not yet meet the Priority 1 requirements for accessibility, and nearly all fail to meet some Priority 2 and Priority 3 requirements. Thus most state Web sites are not easy to use for those with disabilities. This easily used Web-page analyzer, called “Bobby,” can be found at www.cast.org/bobby.

States can deliver public services more expeditiously to their constituents if they provide greater accessibility to their Web sites. But states have another incentive to make their Web sites meet accessibility standards.

A legal mandate

The landmark legislation, the Ameri-

cans with Disabilities Act, which just reached its 10th anniversary, also applies to online government services. At the time of the ADA’s enactment, the Internet as we know it today did not exist and its applicability to e-government had been uncertain. Recently, the U.S. Department of Justice made it clear the ADA relates to e-government services. The department issued a policy ruling that Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act covers government Web sites as public services and therefore requires state and local governments to ensure effective communication with individuals with disabilities over the Internet.

Notable civil suits pertaining to Internet services already have been brought under Title III of the ADA. This part of the ADA requires businesses to make their public accommodations accessible to those with disabilities. These cases include a recent suit against America Online, Inc., charging that its proprietary browser and Internet Web site was inaccessible to blind customers, and a case against the Bank of America that resulted in the bank making its online banking services accessible to blind Internet users. Similar suits could be brought against the public sector under Title II of the ADA.

Moreover, recent amendments to Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 require federal agencies to make electronic-information technology accessible to those with disabilities. This requirement also applies to states receiving federal funding under the Assistive Technology Act of 1998. Section 508 also requires that covered federal and state agencies systemati-

continued on page 23

Resources

- The International Center for Disability Resources on the Internet (<http://icdri.org>)
- The Center for Applied Special Technology (www.cast.org)
- World Wide Web Consortium Accessibility Standards (www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT)
- The U.S. government’s Web site (www.disability.gov)

Bridging the digital divide

continued from page 11

from the inside out. Maine Gov. Angus King this year proposed a plan to distribute notebook computers to every seventh grader in the state. King suggested students would have Internet access through the school library, and would be able to dial in from home. The governor and legislative leaders appointed a commission in August to recommend how the state will spend \$50 million set aside for school technology. King suggested the commission look into buying a new type of portable computer terminals that would give

students access to the Internet under strict state controls.

Pennsylvania recently sponsored the “Tax-free PC” week. During one week in August, Pennsylvania residents were able to purchase a personal computer for home use with the incentive that retailers would not charge any sales tax on the computer. August was picked to target parents who were shopping for school supplies.

As these examples show, states are considering a range of programs to make sure the new Internet economy does not leave their residents behind. ★

Privacy on the line

continued from page 15

tious step in appointing a Task Force on Privacy and Technology to be led by the state’s chief technology officer, Roy Cales. This task force will examine best practices in working to protect proprietary information constituents submit to the state online.

In researching the privacy issue, policy-makers must consider constituents’ values and interests in maintaining control of their personal information. The Direct Marketing Association maintains that online retailers can better target customer needs via the acquisition and manipulation of personal data. Of course, increasing collections

of personal data heightens the opportunities for fraudulent activity. On the other hand, limiting the amount or type of personal information collected can reduce the number of services available online while lowering the efficiency of e-government tools.

E-government models are just starting to develop and will continue to evolve. As they do, networks will increasingly be relied upon to enhance productivity and improve services to constituents. Policy-makers must weigh carefully the implications of information policy for privacy, confidentiality, security and efficiency as part of their state’s e-government agendas. ★

Privacy principles

- *Access* — Individuals should have access to their own data to know what has been collected and to ensure its accuracy.
- *Choice* — Individuals should be given a choice whether or not to provide their personal information, subject to law.
- *Data Integrity* — Individuals should have reasonable assurance that their information was entered correctly and has not been corrupted.
- *Notice* — Individuals should be notified when their information is being collected and informed about how it will be used.

- *Transfer* — Individuals should be notified and given a choice if their personal information will be transferred to another organization than the one that originally collected it, or whether the information will be used for a different purpose than that for which it was collected.
- *Security* — Individuals should have reasonable assurance that their information is secure and protected from outside attack or unauthorized alteration.

Source: “Privacy — Building the Public Trust,” National Governors’ Association, Issue Brief, June 20, 2000, www.nga.com.

A gap in Web access

continued from page 13

cally address the accessibility of their Web sites. Typically, agencies addressed accessibility on an “as needed” basis, but such an approach inevitably failed to remove all barriers to accessing public services. Now, agencies must have a comprehensive plan for meeting accessibility needs.

Having government Web sites meet accessibility standards will help bring online government services to the estimated 54 million Americans with disabilities. With implementation of these standards, however, more can be done to narrow the general digital divide. Additional benefits will accrue as well for nondisabled Americans from accessible Web sites.

Screen-reading software that audibly translates the content of a Web page will give governmental access to people who are illiterate. People who have inexpensive, low-tech or older computers and systems with slow Internet connection speeds will be able to readily obtain information from Web sites accessible to the disabled. Relevant information that is available in a text format can travel easily over common phone lines and be processed by older and slower hardware. Moreover, text-based information is accessible by increasingly popular portable digital phones with Internet access.

As e-government Web sites meet accessibility standards, government services will be brought to more Americans, disabled or not, and communities will benefit from the fuller participation of their residents. Everyone wins, said Cynthia Waddell, ADA compliance officer for San Jose, Calif. and leading national advocate for Internet accessibility. She said, “By embracing our individual differences, the collective community receives greater benefits than that achieved through the segregation and isolation of people with disabilities.” ★