

How to Make Digital Services More Accessible

Many agencies are trying to achieve a broader and more effective definition of accessibility, given their need to improve customer experience and comply with executive orders.

Being able to access physical locations has always been critical — but now digital content and tools factor into accessibility as well.

Four experts at a recent GovLoop [online training](#) offered their thoughts on federal government accessibility and how agencies can position themselves to make digital services more accessible, every day.

Speakers

Serenity Thompson

Deputy Director for Digital Services Division, California Department of Motor Vehicles

Andrew Nielson

Director for Government-Wide IT Accessibility Programs, Office of Government-Wide Policy, General Services Administration (GSA)

Angela Williams

Branch Section 508 Manager, Office of the Chief Information Officer in the Information Resource Management Center, USDA

Chris Dilley

Chief Technology Officer for State and Local Government, ServiceNow

Consider What Accessibility Means

Most people understand that accessibility means equal access for all people. Government agencies know that, at the very least, it requires compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or adherence to the Rehabilitation Act, Section 508.

Simply put by GSA's Nielson, accessibility is “ensuring that federal employees and the beneficiaries or constituents of federal services have equal access, equivalent access, to information and services in all of their forms.”

But there are so many components to digital accessibility. As new technologies emerge, each one may require accessibility adjustments.

At the California DMV, digital services run across a broad spectrum of agency functions, all with the goal “to serve as many Californians in as many ways as they want, need, and like to be served,” said Thompson, who is Deputy Director for the Digital Services Division.

Resources must work for people with differences in vision, hearing, dexterity, and cognition.

“And then within that, of course, our goal is to provide a good web experience for all visitors,” she added. That includes access through a variety of devices, in 13 languages and with materials intended for no higher than a sixth-grade reading level.

Those options show that accessibility is about offering choices within choices, so individuals can independently complete tasks — online, over the phone, or in person.

Base Frameworks on Feedback

“I have a personal mantra,” said Dilley, from ServiceNow. “Every morning I say ‘what can I do today to be the best part of somebody’s day?’”

Before you decide on products and processes, think about their daily impacts on constituents and colleagues.

Constituents depend on agencies to provide the services and tools they need. Additionally, workers depend on their agencies to provide them with an environment that’s accessible to them so they can perform their best work.

Williams, with USDA, believes accessibility success comes from basing frameworks on feedback, and from doing that daily.

“It’s going to be one step at a time, one person at a time... Assess where you are, and continue to assess where you are,” she said.

The continuously iterative process may not start with leadership, but it will flow both up and down. Creating education and culture around accessibility will amplify your efforts.

And, as Nielson said, you also expand accessibility by understanding and measuring where differently abled individuals interact most with the content and tools that they need.

“That’s another place to start,” he said.

Build Accessibility From the Get-Go

It's crucial that agencies begin projects with accessibility at the forefront, and digital creators must understand that accessibility challenges and needs will grow with time.

When re-platforming occurs and accessibility is not a central consideration at the beginning, "It's really hard to overcome these barriers too late in the project," said Thompson.

Decisions about upgrades and tools require prioritizing accessibility early on, if the agency wants to avoid massive re-work. Even compliance needs to be evaluated again and again along the way.

"My advice is to constantly ask how will the impact of every single technological decision that you are making, and future decisions that you are making – user experience decisions – impact the accessibility experience, ADA, and the compliance? And ask it relentlessly," said Thompson.

Share Responsibility, Foster Unity and Promote Education

Those working on accessibility in government can agree that it's best to approach it from an "it's everyone's responsibility" perspective.

Sharing knowledge and learning resources also helps promote accessibility, in a big way, because success will be shared and amplified among individuals and agencies. The importance of continuously improving becomes central to an agency's overall culture.

"In the culture and the ways we interact with one another, we can be more or less inclusive," said Neilson. "And from whatever seat you're sitting in, you can make a difference."

"We're all responsible for accessibility," agreed Williams. "I always say, 'start with the little pieces,' she said. "Start small, and then it will trickle out."

"We're constantly refreshing skills and sending people back through the training courses every year," said Thompsom, about her team. They, and other teams, also evaluate their testing procedures, tools and vendors frequently in order to, as she said, "see what we might be missing, or what has evolved in the ecosystem that we should bring in."

Everyone Can Be an Advocate

It's an "everybody" job to champion accessibility – in building new platforms and capabilities, in understanding what it means and how it grows and in responding to accessibility-related feedback from the community and within agencies.

Everyone deserves equal services and working conditions, and everyone has a role in accessibility improvement.

And beyond compliance, prioritizing accessibility helps to build a diverse community that includes all people and deepens our trust in government agencies.