



# Quick Guide to Digital Accessibility for State and Local Governments

Five steps for creating inclusive, compliant digital experiences

## Introduction

For state and local government agencies, digital accessibility is about more than compliance. It's foundational for serving constituents without discrimination, ensuring fair representation, and maintaining a diverse workforce.

Federal agencies have long had a legal obligation to create, buy, and use accessible information and communications technology (ICT) in compliance with [Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973](#). But digital accessibility isn't just a legal mandate at the federal level: in April 2024, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) published [new rulemaking](#) under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, introducing specific web accessibility standards for state and local governments. Additionally, in recent years, states including Massachusetts, California, and Colorado have implemented their own digital accessibility requirements for government agencies and their vendors.

Legal requirements aside, every person has a right to access the information and services that state and local agencies provide, including the more than [60 million American adults](#) living with a disability. And adopting accessible internal technology and systems is critical for any organization that considers itself a fair, non-discriminatory employer.

Many state and local governments understand the importance of digital accessibility but are unsure how to get started. Others assume that making their digital properties accessible will be a difficult and overly time-consuming process.

**In this guide, we'll help remove the complexity, outlining five concrete steps that your organization can take to ensure your website, software, apps, documents, and other digital assets are usable for all constituents and employees.**

## Your roadmap for online inclusion:

- 1 **Learn** about digital accessibility guidelines and standards.
- 2 **Establish** processes for approaching digital accessibility.
- 3 **Evaluate** the accessibility of your existing digital assets.
- 4 **Remediate** issues in order of priority.
- 5 **Sustain** your progress by embedding accessibility into the digital experience life cycle.

# 1. Learn about digital accessibility guidelines and standards

When you're at the beginning of your journey, digital accessibility can feel like a complex issue. Content formats that may be accessible to people with some types of disabilities may not be accessible to people with other types of disabilities, so it's important to approach the topic through an established framework. Thankfully, experts have published accessibility guidelines and standards for digital products. Understanding these is the first step toward making your products and content accessible.

## Let's explore some of the guidelines and standards that may be relevant to your organization's accessibility goals.

- The **Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)** are the most widely adopted guidelines for creating accessible HTML-based content, including websites. WCAG is the standard referenced by the DOJ's new rulemaking under ADA Title II, as well as by Section 508 and state digital accessibility laws. WCAG outlines specific accessibility criteria for websites based on **four key principles: perceivable, operable, usable, and robust**. Depending on the number of WCAG criteria it meets, a website can achieve one of three levels of conformance: A (basic), AA (intermediate), or AAA (advanced). To reflect developments in technology, and better account for different types of disabilities, WCAG is periodically updated with new criteria. Organizations today should aim for Level AA conformance with the most recent version of WCAG as a baseline for web accessibility. You can learn more about WCAG, and what's required at each level of conformance, in this complete checklist.
- The **U.S. Access Board** has issued a set of accessibility standards for ICT products and services, including websites and software applications. Initially released to help federal agencies comply with Section 508, they are also relevant at the state and local level—particularly as more states implement their own digital accessibility laws.

# What are your legal obligations and deadlines?

Understanding what digital accessibility laws apply to your organization can help you determine which guidelines and standards to use as goalposts. Agencies should also be mindful of any deadlines for meeting these legal obligations and plan accordingly. To comply with the DOJ's new rule under Title II of the ADA, all state and local governments must ensure their web content conforms with WCAG 2.1 Level A and AA criteria, at minimum, within two to three years of the rule's publication date (specific time frames vary based on an organization's size). However, some states also have their own, additional digital accessibility requirements and deadlines: in Colorado, for instance, state entities must ensure their digital technology meets the most current, non-draft version of WCAG by July 1, 2024.

## 2. Establish processes for approaching digital accessibility

Now that you understand some of the guidelines and standards that your digital properties should meet in order to be accessible to people with disabilities, it's time to start thinking about how you can approach adhering to them. In order to achieve your goals efficiently, you'll need to put clearly defined processes in place for managing digital accessibility at your organization.

### Here are a few key questions you'll need to answer:

- What individuals or team will be centrally accountable for making—and keeping—technology accessible? Who will they work with?
- How will we prioritize which digital assets we make accessible first?
- What software tools will we use in order to check for and fix accessibility issues?
- What additional support and services do we need (such as training, manual testing, or expert guidance)?
- How will we approach governance, budgeting, and procurement?

Assigning clear ownership for digital accessibility and defining the order in which you'll make various properties accessible will allow you to stay focused as you tackle the next three steps: evaluation, remediation, and sustaining your momentum. However, **you'll also need to ensure that you have sufficient technology and resources to complete these tasks.** A third-party expert can help you fill any gaps in tooling and resourcing, strategically prioritize projects, and distribute work in an effective manner.



## What about vendors?

Many government agencies rely on third-party vendors to provide internal and external software, systems, and other digital assets. It's just as important to ensure that the technology you purchase meets accessibility standards as it is to make your own properties accessible. As you build out processes for managing digital accessibility internally, you should also establish procedures for procuring third-party technology that can be used by people with disabilities and holding vendors accountable for meeting accessibility requirements.

### 3. Evaluate the accessibility of your existing digital assets

With clear processes in place for meeting your goals, you're ready to jump into action. It's time to understand your current performance against established standards and identify the specific issues that are blocking users from accessing digital information and services. After all, you need to know what's broken before you can fix it.

#### **Organizations should use two types of testing to evaluate their digital properties for accessibility:**

- **Automated testing:** Rapid and relatively inexpensive, automated testing tools allow organizations to easily surface a large volume of accessibility issues and gain a baseline understanding of a digital property's accessibility.
- **Manual testing:** Manual testing builds upon automated testing and is necessary to surface more complex accessibility barriers that only a human can detect.

Because there are unique benefits to both automated and manual testing, a holistic approach to digital accessibility combines these tactics by supplementing routine automated tests with expert manual evaluation.

# What do we test first?

You can't reasonably evaluate all your digital experiences at once. Most organizations use a four-step approach to determine which experiences to prioritize.

1. First, identify all your organization's existing digital properties, including websites, applications, documents, kiosks, and digital signage.
2. Determine which properties can be fixed, which need to be rebuilt, and which should be de-commissioned.
3. For properties that can be fixed, use metrics (such as internal usage data or Google Analytics)—along with the criticality of each experience to users—to determine if there is a high, moderate, or low need for urgent remediation.
4. Build a roadmap for testing and fixing high-need properties first, followed by moderate- and then low-need products.

## **Focus on key user flows**

Testing every page of a digital property as your first order of business will likely yield a lengthy list of accessibility issues that can feel overwhelming and difficult to action. Rather than evaluating entire properties, a best practice is to focus on testing key user flows—paths that individuals take to perform important tasks on a digital property. For example, you could check that someone who lands on your home page can easily enroll in a specific state-funded program. Evaluating key user flows is faster than testing an entire digital property and yields a more manageable list of issues for remediation. It is often performed by people with disabilities using assistive technology.

## 4. Remediate issues in order of priority

It's time to act and address the accessibility barriers on your digital properties. While it might be tempting to try to resolve every bug at once, this can lead to burnout and lost momentum—so it's important to approach remediation in a sustainable way.

Start by tackling the issues that affect the greatest number of users or most significantly interfere with their experience: for example, bugs that affect key user flows and prevent individuals from completing important tasks. Then, move on to lower-risk items once major barriers are addressed. By thoughtfully prioritizing your to-do list, you can make sure that the time you devote to solving for accessibility has the greatest possible impact on your constituents and employees.

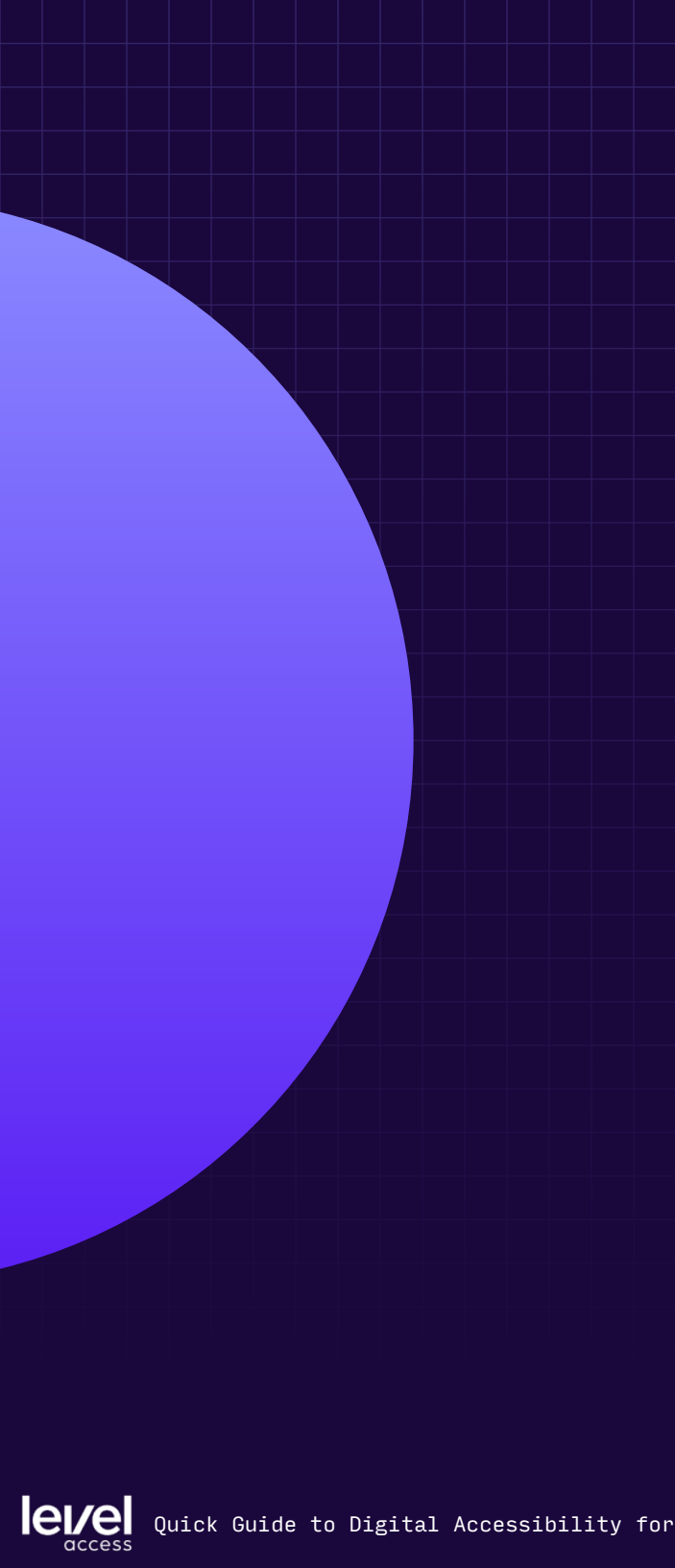
Unsure about which issues are highest priority? A comprehensive digital accessibility software solution will automatically surface high-priority bugs found in testing, making it easier to decide what to work on first. Third-party experts like Level Access can also provide you with technical guidance for resolving more complicated problems efficiently. Additionally, you may want to consider investing in accessibility training to build internal expertise. As you upskill your team, you'll gain the knowledge and skills necessary to strategically manage remediation moving forward.

# 5. Sustain your progress by embedding accessibility into the digital experience life cycle

Digital accessibility isn't a one-and-done project. It's an ongoing journey. Chances are, your website and other digital products will change over time, and more work will be required to keep them accessible for all people.

**The best way to minimize the time your team spends remediating issues in the future is to prioritize accessibility as early as possible when creating a new digital property.** For example, by keeping inclusivity top of mind when a new asset is being designed, you'll prevent potential accessibility barriers from being written into code in the first place. Distributing responsibility across your team in this way will likely require **implementing role-specific accessibility training**. It's also wise to establish a regular cadence for testing at each phase of the creation life cycle, so you can identify and fix new issues as soon as they emerge. Finally, ensure that any technology you purchase from vendors meets the same accessibility standards you uphold internally.

Of course, taking a proactive, integrated approach to digital accessibility is easier said than done. Most organizations lack the knowledge and resources to implement and execute these processes alone. For that reason, teams that succeed at keeping their digital products accessible to all **generally rely on third-party partners to provide the necessary tooling, training, and strategic support.**



# Fast-track your digital accessibility and compliance efforts with a trusted partner

All government agencies have an obligation to provide accessible information and services to their constituents and to model equitable employment practices. But building, and maintaining, accessible digital properties can be challenging to do alone. You can speed up and simplify this process with the right partner.

As the market-leading digital accessibility solution, Level Access combines software for testing, remediation, and reporting with expert managed services including manual evaluations, design evaluations, and strategic support. We also upskill teams through comprehensive live and self-paced training, encompassing both general and role-specific best practices. By leveraging advanced technology alongside human expertise and education, agencies can quickly become, and stay, inclusive and compliant.

We work with organizations across the public and private sectors, and offer a product that is cleared for security by the federal government's FedRAMP authorization program. That means it can easily map to your state's security requirements.

# We're here to help

Level Access' end-to-end digital accessibility solution makes it easy for organizations to create and maintain inclusive, compliant digital experiences.

**Engage with our team today to start making progress toward your goals.**

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