

UNLOCKING THE VIRTUAL FRONT DOOR

Summary of Recommendations

It is more important than ever that the federal government's technology be accessible for people with disabilities, including older adults and veterans, who experience disabilities at higher rates than the general population.

Recent projections show there will be more than 80 million people aged 65 or older living in the United States by 2040—twice the number in 2000.

Accessible technology is crucial for taxpayers seeking to secure health care, receive Social Security and VA benefits, pay taxes, and for people working—or seeking to work—in the federal government.

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 requires federal technology to be accessible for people with disabilities. This report's 12 recommendations for the Executive Branch and Congress provide a playbook to make federal technology accessible for everyone.



INCREASING ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

- 1. The Department of Justice should resume reporting on federal compliance with Section 508 requirements.** Section 508 requires DOJ to report on the federal government's compliance with Section 508 every two years. However, DOJ has not issued a report since 2012. In response to bipartisan Aging Committee oversight, DOJ recently committed to issuing its first report in a decade.
- 2. The General Services Administration should publish data on Section 508 compliance.** GSA gathers and analyzes data on Section 508 compliance twice a year but does not release it to the public or Congress. Releasing these data publicly will improve transparency and accountability regarding Section 508 compliance.
- 3. The Office of Management and Budget should review its strategic plan for improving management of Section 508.** OMB's current strategic plan was released in 2013 and should be reviewed using current information and compliance data.
- 4. Inspectors general should increase oversight of Section 508 compliance.** Independent watchdogs rarely examine Section 508 compliance within departments and agencies. Increased oversight will improve accessibility for taxpayers and workers.



A Report by the Majority Staff of
The U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging



IMPROVING THE ACCESSIBILITY OF FEDERAL TECHNOLOGY FOR WORKERS AND TAXPAYERS

- 5. Departments and agencies must maintain capacity to conduct automated Section 508 compliance scans.** VA's ability to monitor Section 508 compliance was limited when a contract lapsed, reducing its ability to identify accessibility shortfalls. Departments and agencies must maintain capacity to monitor Section 508 compliance.
- 6. Departments and agencies should incorporate people with disabilities and older adults into technology planning and evaluation.** Older adults and people with disabilities can improve accessibility of Federal federal technology when given opportunities to provide direct input. Departments and agencies should increase outreach to ensure that selection, installment, and evaluation of technology is accessible and usable.
- 7. Departments and agencies should broaden the use of human testers to evaluate Section 508 compliance and technology accessibility.** Automated tools can scan websites for Section 508 violations but will not find all accessibility barriers, underscoring the importance of trained human testers.
- 8. Departments and agencies should consider appointment of accessibility officers with direct responsibility for Section 508 compliance.** Responsibility for Section 508 compliance within agencies is often scattered. Centralizing responsibility for Section 508 compliance could improve accessibility for taxpayers and workers.
- 9. Departments and agencies should ensure that federal workers and the public have robust reporting pathways for Section 508 complaints.** Agencies can be slow to resolve Section 508 violations and complaints. Shortening response timelines will improve the accessibility of Federal federal information and services for taxpayers and workers.



ACTIONS FOR CONGRESS

- 10. Congress should consider amending Section 508, a quarter-century after it was last substantially updated.** Section 508 has been unchanged since 1998 while technology has changed dramatically during that time. Congress should consider amending the law to improve statutory language for meeting the needs of people with disabilities and older adults; align the law with current technology; strengthen accountability measures; add new enforcement authority; target appropriations to improve accessibility; and improve the ability of taxpayers and workers to resolve accessibility complaints.
- 11. Congress should hold federal departments and agencies accountable for Section 508 compliance through oversight and legislation.** Congressional oversight of Section 508 compliance appears to have been infrequent over the last 25 years. Congress should engage in new oversight efforts, including through the appropriations process, in order to ensure departments and agencies are meeting accessibility requirements.
- 12. Congress should ensure the accessibility of its own technology and websites for people with disabilities and older adults.** In order to ensure that older adults and people with disabilities can fully participate in our Nation's representative democracy, Congress should evaluate the accessibility of its technology and take steps to improve.

