

TECH ACCESSIBILITY AT VA

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OFFICE OF TECHNOLOGY STRATEGIES (TS)

INTRODUCTION

With current estimates suggesting that 20% of the American population is disabled, including over 3.5 million service-disabled Veterans, this Tech Insight promotes the commitment of leadership at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to ensure technology accessibility. It begins with compliance to our legal obligations under Section 504 and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

THE REHABILITATION ACT

Section 504 is the first Federal Civil Rights protection for people with disabilities. It is an anti-discrimination statute that requires the needs of people with disabilities be met as adequately as the needs of those who are not disabled. The statute defines a person with a disability as someone who:

The first major legislative effort to secure a level playing field for individuals with disabilities is the [Rehabilitation Act of 1973](#). It prohibited discrimination on the basis of disability in programs run by federal agencies; programs that receive federal financial assistance; in federal employment; and in the employment practices of federal contractors.

Also known as the “Rehab Act,” there are two major sections within it that impact the use of technology – Section 504 and Section 508. The responsibilities under these sections can overlap: Section 504 provides the context that clarifies the meaning of the Rehabilitation Act, and Section 508 provides the direction of the law.

SECTION 504

Section 504 is the first Federal Civil Rights protection for people with disabilities. It is an anti-discrimination statute that requires the needs of people with disabilities be met as adequately as the needs of those who are not disabled. The statute defines a person with a disability as someone who:

- Has a physical or mental impairment that “substantially” limits one or more major life activities (such as walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, and learning)
- Has a record of the impairment
- Is regarded as having impairment, or a significant difficulty that is not temporary

Section 504 requires agencies to provide individuals with disabilities an equal opportunity to participate in their programs and benefit from their services, including the provision of information to employees and members of the public. Agencies are required to provide appropriate auxiliary aids, where necessary to ensure an equal opportunity. Types of auxiliary aids may include electronic storage devices, audiotapes, telecommunications devices for deaf persons (TDD), captioning of video, and other methods of making information available and accessible to persons with disabilities.

While the Section 504 definition is very broadly defined, we know that the major categories of disability type are visual, including blindness, low vision, and color-blindness; hearing; motor, including an inability to use a mouse device and a slow response time; and cognitive, including an inability to focus and remember large amounts of information.

SECTION 508

Section 508 was added to section 504 in 1998 to establish guidelines for technology accessibility. Any electronic information technology (EI&T) used, maintained, developed, or procured by Federal agencies must be accessible to persons with disabilities, unless an undue burden would be imposed on the agency. This includes members of the public with disabilities who use the information and data generated by the agency. Businesses must also comply with Section 508 when supplying EI&T goods and services to the federal government. State governments that receive funding under the Assistive Technology Act of 1998 are also required to implement all conditions of Section 508 within their states.

WHAT IS ACCESSIBLE IT?

An [accessible](#) information technology system is one that can be operated in a variety of ways and does not rely on a single sense or ability of the user. For example, a system that provides output only in visual format may not be accessible to people who are blind, and a system that provides output only in audio format may not be accessible to people who are deaf. Some individuals with disabilities may also need accessibility-related software or peripheral devices in order to use systems that comply with Section 508.

ACCESSIBILITY STANDARDS

Section 508 provided the first Federal accessibility standard for the Internet. While the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) was already created by the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI), it was a voluntary international body and the guidelines were not written as standards. On the other hand, Section 508 outlines standards that are enforceable. Section 508 directed the Access Board (the Architectural, and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board) to create binding, enforceable standards that clearly outline and identify "accessible" E&T products. The Access Board enlisted the help of government, academic, industry, and disability advocacy groups to create the EITAAC, or Electronic and Information Technology Access Advisory Committee. With the help of this committee, the Access Board was able to create the first set of accessibility standards for Federal E&ITA list of the Section 508 standards that apply to web accessibility is provided in the [Web AIM Section 508 Checklist](#).

SECTION 508 AT VA

The VA Section 508 Office operates a lab facility that audits and validates E&IT solutions for compliance with standards and policies. It consults with federal program and project managers to implement Section 508 initiatives and serves as a liaison for VA's Chief Information Officer (CIO). It also makes department policy recommendations regarding 508 issues and produces training in all areas of Section 508, ensuring accessibility of E&IT content and documents.

An abundance of Section 508 resources, including training programs, are available at the VA Section 508 home page at <http://www.section508.va.gov/>. The Section 508 office provides access to Section 508 checklists and processes, such as conformance document submissions. You can even contact VA Section 508 by emailing Section508@va.gov.

SECTION 508 TECHNICAL CRITERIA

Technical criteria requirements for Section 508 are broken down by the following categories:

- Software applications and operating systems
- Web-based information or applications
- Telecommunications
- Video or multimedia products
- Self-contained closed products
- Desktop and portable computers

To be Section 508 compliant, checklists help designers and developers ensure that they have met all the criteria that are necessary. For example, when developing web pages, links must use

keywords within the anchor text to describe the destination page. This helps those who use assistive technology to understand where a link will take them. For example, instead of “Click here” on a submit button, your anchor text could say, “Sign up for our newsletter.”

CONCLUSION

Advances in technology have dramatically changed the quality of life for many people with disabilities. Software programs, for example, now read electronic text out loud so that those who are visually impaired can use computers to access text content. Despite technology’s great potential for people with disabilities, much can be done to advance accessibility. Your part in utilizing and implementing the VA resources for Section 508 compliance will contribute greatly in helping to fully realize the potential of technology accessibility for Veterans, VA staff, and all other individuals with disabilities.

If you have any questions about technology accessibility at VA, don’t hesitate to [ask TS](#) for assistance or more information.

TS TECH INSIGHT SERIES

The monthly Tech Insight series aims to help readers make better decisions and be more informed customers (of Office of Information & Technology's products and services) by providing them with high-level overviews of technology issues that impact or will impact VA's Information Technology (IT) environment. Tech Insights introduce topics in an easily digestible fashion by presenting background information on the topic, clearly explaining its importance within VA, and providing recommendations for success from TS. View all TS Tech Insights [here](#).

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