Excluding the disabled: The secret prejudice of technology

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As the Public Health Emergency pushed everyone inside, the internet became the savior of the day. Whether shopping for food, connecting with loved ones, participating in a telehealth visit, or scheduling COVID screenings or vaccinations, the internet plays a central role in how we stay connected, conduct business, and manage our health. For some, however, it only heightens the disparity in access. Are you unknowingly limiting access?

US ranks 3rd for number of active internet users

Over 313 million internet users

98% of the internet is not accessible to people with disabilities

7.3 million people have some form of visual disability

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are 61 million Americans, 26% of the total population, currently living with a disability. Every disabled American is facing their own unique challenge, whether it be mobility, cognition, visual impairment, or another condition that makes it difficult or impossible for them to use a computer or smartphone. Assistive technology devices, such as screen readers, are made to ensure disabled users can navigate and enjoy the internet and can perform the same functions as others, like ordering food or scheduling a medical appointment. However, users only benefit when the screen reader or other assistive technology can perform its intended function. For that to occur, websites must conform to the universal standards on which these devices operate. These standards, developed by the World Wide Web Consortium and its director, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, who founded the web 30 years ago, have been largely ignored as the web has grown.

Written by Deidra B Abbott, MPH; Wendy S Woske, RN, BSN, MHA; and Jason McKee, Co-founder of Accessibility Shield

Deidra has more than 30 years of experience providing health care consultative support in the public and private sectors. Her key area of focus is long-term services and supports service and system development.
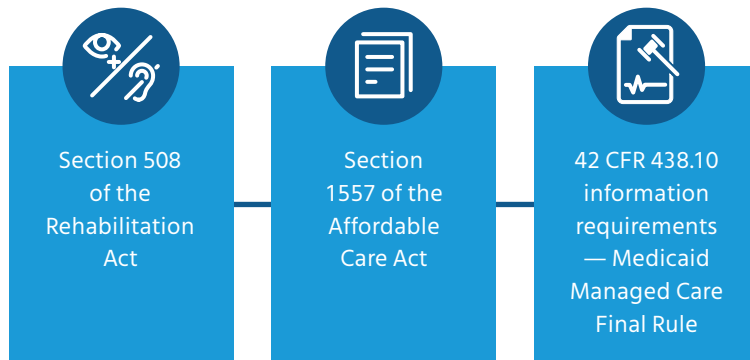
Starting her career as a computer programmer before becoming a nurse, Wendy brings over 25 years of experience working with various health care delivery models and waiver programs, building sustainable health care delivery systems for vulnerable populations.

Jason is a writer and public speaker whose key focus is digital inclusion and the need for a truly accessible web. He previously held positions in marketing and journalism.

Federal regulations require that states provide fair and equal access to online services. This means it is unlawful to discriminate based on disabilities. Some of these laws refer to specific HTML standards that must be met, such as Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. When these standards are met, the assistive technology devices used by people with disabilities can navigate the website and provide an equal experience to that of persons not requiring adaptive support. While State Medicaid agencies and their managed care contractors are required by law to make their digital infrastructure accessible to everyone, most struggle to understand the work that is required or have inadequate resources to dedicate to the task.

Federal Accessibility Requirements

Accessibility Shield identifies areas in a website's code that are not compliant with federal standards for accessibility of information by disabled persons and can assist in bringing the website into compliance.

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act

Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act

42 CFR 438.10 information requirements — Medicaid Managed Care Final Rule

Mercer has partnered with Accessibility Shield, based in Philadelphia, to provide the solution. Experts in accessible code and the devices used by people with disabilities, Accessibility Shield provides clear auditing services that identify failures in compliance. The company works with clients until the code is accessible and then continues to monitor the websites, apps, documents, and forms tied to the website as they evolve to assure compliance is always met and all users have a fair and equal experience.

Accessibility Shield has also created a program to train people with disabilities to become professional website testers. This program works with state departments of vocation and rehabilitation to prepare people with disabilities for a rewarding career in the tech industry. The demand for these positions is growing, and as it does, the web is becoming more accessible for everyone.

"We are committed to making the web an inclusive place," said Accessibility Shield co-founder Jason McKee. "This partnership is about more than legal compliance. It's about serving a population often overlooked by the tech industry and the folks at Mercer are helping us change that."

We have embraced inclusivity in the health care industry and recognized an opportunity to take action. We share the same beliefs as many of you and recognize the social and legal importance of this work. All individuals, regardless of their ability, deserve the same access and convenience made available through the internet. We are excited about the great work that we can do together and level the playing field for all persons, regardless of ability.

Key Takeaways

Now more than ever, the internet plays a critical role in ensuring people with disabilities can get and stay connected. States and their managed care contractors should have processes in place to maintain the highest levels of inclusivity of those with disabilities by ensuring their websites comply with coding standards. This allows assistive technology to fulfill its mission of helping to support those who need to access the different services available via the internet.

For More Information

Our team is committed to making the internet accessible for all and encourages our state partners to contact your Mercer representative or outreach directly to Jason McKee at jmckee@accessibilityshield.com to learn more about how Accessibility Shield can help.

Email us at
mercer.government@mercer.com
if you have additional questions or to speak to a client leader. You can also be added to our distribution list to ensure you receive our white papers, flash updates, and webinar invites.

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