

Access Ready Elections

When the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was enacted in 1990, the Internet as we know it today did not exist as the ubiquitous infrastructure for information and commerce. Neither did the information technology-driven workplace or election space. Today the internet and information and communications technology (ICT) play a critical role in the daily personal, professional and civic life of Americans. This also encompasses more and more how the election process works.

Access Ready INC. is an independent, non-profit, cross-disability education and advocacy organization promoting a policy of inclusion and accessibility of information and communications technology (ICT). Access Ready's strategies include technical findings, policy discussions, best practices, and advocacy efforts made available to the public through www.accessready.org, its social media stream, and other public relations efforts.

Access Ready asks the question, "If physical facilities in this country must be built in accordance with accessibility standards, why not information and communications technology?" Businesses, employers, and federal, state, and local governments are becoming increasingly dependent on information and communications technology to provide goods and services. For people with disabilities, accessible information and communications technology is a necessity, not a luxury or a convenience, which fosters independence, economic self-sufficiency, and active, meaningful participation in civic life.

What is an Access Ready Environment?

An access Ready Environment is where access for people with disabilities at the physical and technological levels is a matter of forethought, design, inclusion and planning instead of a condition of afterthought, delay and discrimination resulting in risk to all concerned.

Many election officials under Title II of the (ADA) are using websites and ICT to provide public access to election services. To support these activities, the internal or employee/volunteer facing operations of election offices are also driven by ICT. An Access Ready policy is intended to advance accessibility across the information and communications technology used in the election process.

Many websites and the ICT used in election offices render use by individuals with disabilities difficult or impossible. Barriers imposed by technology that has not been required to be accessible is, in large part, to blame. Emerging technology, such as electronic poll books, must be and are required to be accessible if officials are going to create Access Ready Elections.

Being unable to access websites and emerging ICT puts voters with disabilities at a great disadvantage in today's election process, which is driven by a dynamic electronic service delivery model. The Access Ready Environment is one where website and ICT accessibility is designed in from the outset. It is vital that election officials require accessibility now because election systems purchased today will be in use for a decade or more.

For many, it is now difficult to imagine a world without the unprecedented access to information that the web provides. Why would it be acceptable not to provide such access to people with disabilities? Especially in the context of voting, where access to information is essential, no other minority would stand for such limitations and society would not allow such a thing. For election officials to ignore people with disabilities as a constituency in the end-to-end election process is a tremendous mistake. This minority now includes twenty-five percent of the general population according to the Centers for Disease Control. An Access Ready policy moves elections in the right direction.

It is a fact that information and communications technology is dramatically changing the way election offices serve their constituents. The recent COVID pandemic brought this home to millions in very stark ways. When we were all told to go home to live, work, learn, teach, shop and vote many people with disabilities found the inaccessibility of websites and other ICT based services severely limited their abilities to participate.

Election officials are increasingly providing their constituents access to election services through their websites. By adopting an Access Ready Policy, election officials can achieve and maintain accessibility on the web and through their ICT. Through election websites, the public can obtain information or securely correspond with local officials. They can register to vote, and access HTML ballots that allow them to vote absentee. The availability of these online services makes life easier for voters, and enables election officials to operate more transparently, efficiently and cost effectively. As a closed system, election officials can assure the public of the security of their vote in a more transparent manner.

The disability community now represents significantly more than 25% of the electorate. In addition, people with disabilities represent a vast untapped talent pool ready to join the election workforce and poll worker pool. Given the rehabilitation funding spent by taxpayers it is foolish not to seek out qualified individuals with disabilities. But inaccessible employee-facing and poll worker-facing technology may prevent these workers from doing their jobs.

Again, the COVID pandemic has pushed forward the need for employees who can and want to work from home. This is a perfect scenario for workers with disabilities in this employee/volunteer deprived recruitment environment.

What is needed is the adoption of an Access Ready Policy that applies to ICT across the election process. The promise of the Americans with Disabilities Act to provide an equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities to participate in and benefit from all aspects of American civic life, including elections, will be achieved in today's technologically advanced society only if it is clear to election officials that their information and communications technology systems must be accessible.

By adopting an Access Ready Policy election officials can achieve and maintain accessibility of their online and voting technology. The Access Ready environment is one where IT is designed and purchased accessibly from the outset - when it is easiest, least expensive, and most effective - and is not an afterthought. In addition, an Access Ready policy provides a strategic approach to incorporating accessibility into existing technology over time. Embracing an Access Ready policy can accomplish this over reasonable budget cycles without real difficulty. Finally, because becoming accessible is only the beginning - without policies in place to maintain it, the effort is wasted - an Access Ready policy helps ensure accessibility barriers will not reemerge over time.

Douglas George Towne

Chair and Chief Executive Officer

Access Ready Inc.