



Making Public Documents Accessible: What Local Governments Need to Know

Across the country, local governments are increasingly being held to higher standards when it comes to digital accessibility. This includes not just websites, but also the often-overlooked category of public documents—everything from council meeting minutes to PDFs embedded on department pages. With both legal mandates and community expectations mounting, now is the time for agencies to develop a proactive plan for compliance.

What's Required, By When, and For Whom?

Under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), all state and local governments—regardless of size—must ensure that their digital content is accessible to individuals with disabilities. This includes not just websites but also the documents those websites host or link to. On top of that, Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act requires federal agencies and organizations receiving federal funding to provide accessible electronic documents.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) issued a final rule in April 2024 that sets clear digital accessibility standards for all public entities. The rule requires state and local government websites and mobile apps to conform to **WCAG 2.1 Level AA**, with compliance deadlines based on population:

- **Large jurisdictions (≥50,000 residents):** Must comply by **April 24, 2026**
- **Smaller jurisdictions (<50,000 residents):** Must comply by **April 24, 2027**
- **Special districts (all sizes):** Must comply by **April 24, 2027**

This means local agencies now face a firm legal deadline to audit and remediate any digital content—including documents—that falls short of accessibility standards.

The Scope and Challenges of Remediation

Remediating documents for accessibility isn't as simple as applying a filter or pushing a button. Many older PDFs and Word files were created without any accessibility considerations—missing proper tags, lacking readable structure, or using scanned images that screen readers can't interpret.

Local agencies often have **thousands of legacy documents** dating back years or even decades, many of which are stored across multiple departments and content management

systems. Sorting through these to determine what must be remediated, archived, or removed is a massive undertaking. Additionally, staff may lack the training or tools to create accessible documents going forward, perpetuating the issue.

Strategic Steps Forward

While the scale of the challenge can be daunting, agencies don't need to go it alone—or try to do everything at once. A few best practices include:

- **Inventory Existing Content:** Start by cataloging all public-facing documents. Identify which ones are critical to public access and services.
- **Prioritize Based on Use:** Focus remediation efforts on high-traffic documents and forms essential for civic participation or service access.
- **Implement Accessibility in Workflow:** Train staff and adopt tools that ensure new documents are created accessibly from the start.
- **Seek External Support:** Many vendors and consultants specialize in accessibility audits and remediation. Leveraging external help can accelerate compliance efforts.

All of these are solid options—but they also require time, staff capacity, and budget.

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