



THE STATE OF DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY IN HEALTHCARE

**5 Problems Healthcare Providers Need to Fix
to Make Their Websites Accessible and Compliant**

INTRODUCTION

According to the United States Census Bureau, **56.7 million Americans have a disability**¹.



Although persons with disabilities make up 19 percent of the U.S. population, they don't receive the same quality healthcare as able-bodied Americans. Patients with physical or cognitive disabilities are less likely to receive preventative services, are less satisfied with their care, and incur higher costs than abled patients².

Healthcare providers have an opportunity to make their services more accessible, beginning with the information on their websites.

We recently conducted a research project that examined accessibility on healthcare system websites. We found that providers have a long way to go to comply with standards, such as the Affordable Care Act and the **Americans with Disabilities Act**.

This white paper outlines the findings from our research, as well as best practices for digital accessibility.

¹ United States Census Bureau, [Nearly 1 in 5 People Have a Disability in the U.S., Census Bureau Reports \(2010\)](#)

² Disability and Health Care Costs in the Medicare Population, Chan et al. (2002)



Who Will Benefit From Reading This White Paper?



This document is for healthcare providers that want to identify their accessibility gaps, so they can give patients with disabilities a seamless digital experience. It will assist:

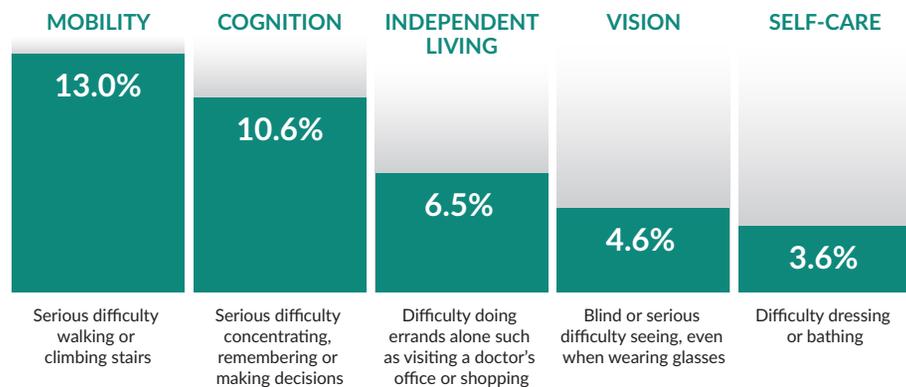
- Digital marketers and CMOs
- Website administrators and IT professionals
- Compliance professionals
- Disability and accessibility services professionals

MORE AMERICANS ARE BEING DIAGNOSED WITH DISABILITIES: ARE YOU PREPARED TO SERVE THEM?

Disabilities cost \$400 billion per year in healthcare expenditures³.

In the United States, one out of every five adults has a disability⁴. The most common disability involves mobility limitation, which impacts 13 percent of adults. The following graph from the Center of Disease Control and Prevention shows how many U.S. adults have specific disabilities:

Percentage of Adults with Select Functional Disability Types



The likelihood of developing a disability increases with age. For example, a person can experience a disability after a stroke or a fall. A growing body of research has shown that Baby Boomers are more likely to acquire a disability late in life, as compared with the previous generation⁵.

Meanwhile, neurological disabilities are on the rise – particularly amongst children. The number of disabled children has jumped by 16 percent since 2001, potentially due to increased Autism diagnosis⁶.



Nearly **six million children** had a disability in 2010 – almost one million more than in 2001.

³ United States Census Bureau, [Nearly 1 in 5 People Have a Disability in the U.S., Census Bureau Reports](#) (2010)

⁴ Center for Disease Control and Prevention, ["CDC: 53 million adults in the US live with a disability"](#) (2015)



⁵ Population Reference Bureau, ["Aging U.S. Baby Boomers Face More Disability"](#) (2013)

⁶ NPR, ["What's Behind The Stark Rise In Children's Disabilities"](#) (2014)

NEW STUDY: MOST HEALTHCARE PROVIDER WEBSITES FAIL TO COMPLY WITH REGULATIONS

Although the number of Americans with disabilities is on the rise, few healthcare providers are truly prepared to meet their needs. Despite providers' best attempts to be accessible, people with disabilities still face many barriers to quality healthcare.

These barriers often start from a person's first interaction with a health service website. For example, a patient who is blind may use assistive technology to book an appointment. If your site isn't developed properly, they won't be able to decipher what's on the page, resulting in a frustrating experience.

Our research examined how well healthcare providers make their websites accessible to persons with disabilities.

We examined the five top-grossing for-profit and nonprofit healthcare systems based on net-patient revenue. All of the organizations had hundreds of facilities throughout the U.S. and annual net-patient revenues of over \$1 billion USD.

Net-Patient Revenue Reported Annually for 2015

For-Profit Healthcare Systems	Non-Profit Healthcare Systems
\$39,678,000,000	\$18,756,607,000
\$19,437,000,000	\$13,366,493,000
\$18,634,000,000	\$12,484,526,000
\$9,043,451,000	\$11,783,549,000
\$7,054,907,000	\$11,390,138,000

Despite being amongst the highest-grossing healthcare providers in the country, many lack in their website accessibility and compliance to related legislation. Many of the systems that we studied for this project require an overhaul of their websites to comply with **Section 508** of the **Americans with Disabilities Act** and **Section 1557** of the Affordable Care Act.



WHICH REGULATIONS AND GUIDELINES MUST HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS COMPLY WITH?

The Affordable Care Act, Section 1557

Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) states that any health program that received funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services must make its information, services, and facilities accessible. This includes websites, online help tools, and online bill payment systems.

Section 1557 also requires covered entities to provide “appropriate auxiliary aids and services for individuals with disabilities.” For example, these aids can include making your online documents available in large-print or Braille.

The Americans with Disabilities Act

The **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** was passed in 1990. It “prohibits discrimination and ensures equal opportunity for persons with disabilities in employment, State and local government services, public accommodations, commercial facilities, and transportation”.

Title II of the ADA’s Standards for Accessible Design requires state and local governments to “ensure that communications with individuals with hearing, vision, or speech impairments are as effective as communications with others.” The communication section does not explicitly mention the Internet or information technology.

Meanwhile, Title III states that, “a public accommodation must provide auxiliary aids and services when they are necessary to ensure effective communication with individuals with hearing, vision, or speech impairments.”

In the near future, the Department of Justice is expected to rule on whether organizations must comply with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0.

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act was amended in 1998. The legislation requires federally funded entities to make their electronic and information technology accessible, or provide an alternative, for persons with disabilities.

A recent amendment to **Section 508** went into effect on March 20, 2017. By January 18, 2018, organizations must ensure that all of their information and communication technology conforms with the **Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0** Level A and Level AA standards.

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0

WCAG 2.0 are the universally accepted technical guidelines for web accessibility. They contain three levels: Level A, Level AA, and Level AAA. Level AA is recommended for most standards and regulations.

HOW HEALTHCARE WEBSITES STACK UP

Our study found five key areas where healthcare provider websites fail to provide patients with disabilities an inclusive digital experience:

1. Lack of a Notice of Non-Discrimination

Section 1557 of the ACA requires covered entities to post a notice of non-discrimination on their websites. The notice must inform consumers of the availability of accommodations and how they can access them.

In addition to posting the Notice in English, covered entities must post taglines in at least fifteen of their state's most widely-spoken languages. The taglines inform consumers of the language services available to them. For example, the French tagline taken from the HCA website's non-discrimination Notice translates to "ATTENTION: If you speak French, language help services are offered free of charge."

Fifty percent of the healthcare system websites that we examined contained a notice of non-discrimination at the bottom of their homepages. Of these websites, only four posted taglines in at least 15 languages.

2. Focusing on Investors, Not Patients

All of the websites that we visited focused on procuring investors, as opposed to assisting patients. They offer little information on accessing services, with the exception of a location finder.

Many of the sites fell short when it came to providing information for people with disabilities. Only one for-profit healthcare system mentioned disabilities when they discussed their services. One healthcare system boasted a page titled "Accessibility Policy" at the bottom of their homepage. But upon further exploration, this page was simply a reiteration of the notice of non-discrimination.

3. Failure to Comply with WCAG 2.0

For a website to be fully compliant, it must contain zero issues. We used HTML CodeSniffer, an open source, automated testing tool, to determine the number of problems on each healthcare provider website. However, manual and functional testing by people with disabilities must also be conducted to uncover accessibility issues.

On average, each site had 12.5 issues with Level A compliance and 27.9 issues with Level AA compliance.

4. Mobile Accessibility

We examined the ten healthcare systems to determine if they offered mobile technology. If so, was it accessible?

All of the organizations provided a mobile version of their website. Six of them offered a consumer or patient-facing application.

Mobile websites are held to similar standards as full websites, in respect to **WCAG 2.0** conformance.

5. Depicting Disabilities

Finding images of disabilities on healthcare system websites proved difficult, because disability is subjective. For the purpose of this project, we chose images that inferred a physical disability.

For each site, we examined every webpage directly accessible from the homepage. Only five out of the ten sites had images showing a disability. Healthcare providers have an opportunity to make their websites more relatable by including people with disabilities in their visual brand.

WHY HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS MUST MAKE DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY A TOP PRIORITY

Hospitals, clinics, and other healthcare centers should make it as easy as possible for patients with disabilities to engage with them digitally.

However, many healthcare providers may not know where to start with digital accessibility and ACA compliance. Since the ACA is a fairly new regulation and its future is uncertain, providers are often not clear on how to adhere to it.

But failure to prioritize accessibility can lead to the following:

- Damage to your reputation when word spreads that you do not fully accommodate patients with disabilities.
- Lawsuits from legal firms and advocacy groups.
- The inability to comply with the ADA. The ADA can obtain civil penalties of up to \$55,000 for the first violation and \$110,000 for each subsequent violation.⁷
- Loss of funding from the U.S. government for failing to comply with the ACA or **Section 508** of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act.
- Losing patients to other healthcare providers that can better meet their needs.

THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION ABOUT DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY

Healthcare providers that want to assist persons with disabilities must implement a comprehensive digital accessibility solution.

Digital accessibility isn't just ensuring that people who are blind or deaf can access your web content. Complete accessibility includes assistive technology, a website evaluation, a remediation plan, ongoing monitoring, and multimedia accessibility. Together, these components give people with disabilities a seamless digital experience.

When you make your content accessible, you give patients with disabilities an inclusive experience that leads to higher quality care.

Accessible institutions also mitigate the risks of lawsuits and project a disability-friendly environment to patients and their families. According to Rich Donovan, CEO of the Return on Disability Group, "friends and family react strongly and emotionally to direct as well as subtle cues that connect brands to persons with disabilities."⁸ When you offer disability-friendly services, your patients' friends and families are more likely to recommend you to others.

⁷ Disabled World Towards Tomorrow, [ADA Law and Accessibility: The Costs of Non-Compliance](#) (2009)

⁸ Donovan, "Brand & Disability: An Advertising Primer" (2014)

5 BEST PRACTICES FOR DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY

Healthcare organizations have a massive opportunity to ramp up their digital accessibility efforts and make their marketing inclusive.

Here are five keys to making your digital content accessible:

1. Integrate assistive technology with your website.

Assistive technology accommodates people who have difficulty typing, moving a mouse, reading a screen, or using a touch-screen smartphone. It allows them to easily navigate your website to research your services, book appointments, and access tests.

The technology allows people with physical disabilities to engage with you and receive a consistent experience across all of your digital channels.

2. Ask persons with disabilities to test your website and mobile app.

Web developers conduct automated tests to ensure that your site functions. However, automated testing only catches about 30 percent of the issues that people with disabilities will encounter with your content.

In addition to automated testing, organizations should have people with disabilities perform manual and functional tests. They can test your site against a range of assistive technologies and report on problems.

3. Allow people who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices to view your online content.

When you include AAC devices in your digital accessibility toolkit, you make it easier for people with no or poor speech to communicate with you. They can use the technology to browse your website and book appointments.

4. Provide digital content in multiple, accessible formats.

Digital accessibility doesn't end with your website. To provide an inclusive experience, you must make all of your content and multimedia files accessible. For example:

- Provide text alternatives for images.
- Offer closed captioning and transcripts on videos.
- Create audio descriptions of your text files.
- Remediate your PDFs so that they are properly tagged and compliant with relevant standards.

5. Keep persons with disabilities in mind when you develop your site.

During the development phase, look for barriers that will make it difficult for persons with disabilities to navigate your site and find information. For example:

- Use large, readable fonts.
- Ensure that all of your links are clear and visible.
- Offer multiple ways for users to navigate throughout your site.
- Allow users to interact with your site using just their keyboard.

Making your digital content compliant and accessible doesn't end when you launch your website. Be sure to put a monitoring system in place, so you can quickly catch errors that would prevent persons with disabilities from interacting with your organization.

GIVE PATIENTS WITH DISABILITIES A SEAMLESS AND INCLUSIVE DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

eSSENTIAL Accessibility has developed a comprehensive solution to help healthcare providers give persons with disabilities a barrier-free online experience. Our solution includes assistive technology, website and mobile evaluations, PDF remediation, user testing, multi-media accessibility, ongoing monitoring, and training.

By providing both assistive technology and digital accessibility in one solution, we help you:

Achieve and Maintain Compliance

We ensure compliance with **WCAG 2.0, Section 1557** of the Affordable Care Act, **Section 508** of the Rehabilitation Act, and the **Americans with Disabilities Act**. We do this through ongoing testing, training, and monitoring.

Enhance Your Digital Experience for Patients With Disabilities

You can rest assured that your site is user-friendly, as we provide ongoing feedback from people with disabilities. They use multiple assistive technologies to test your website and pinpoint any potential barriers. Featuring assistive technology on your site allows patients with disabilities to engage with you digitally and find the information they need.

Project a Disability-Friendly Environment

Each month, more than 100 million people visit websites that feature eSSENTIAL Accessibility. Our recognizable, interactive icon shows visitors that you are committed to meeting the needs of patients with disabilities.



eSSENTIAL ACCESSIBILITY IN ACTION

Helping a Global Healthcare Provider Project a Disability-Friendly Image to Patients and Their Families

Merck, a global healthcare leader, is working to help the world be well. As part of its commitment to increasing access to healthcare, Merck wanted to make its internal and external digital properties inclusive and disability-friendly.

Merck is partnering with eSSENTIAL Accessibility to implement a comprehensive accessibility solution and achieve the following results:



- Project a disability-friendly and inclusive image to website visitors, job applicants, and employees with disabilities. To date, more than 13,000 people who care deeply about disability and diversity have engaged with Merck digitally.
- Achieve and maintain compliance with web accessibility standards, regulations, and **WCAG 2.0**.
- Create a culture of trust and inclusion. By supporting assistive technology communication, Merck has made it easier for people with disabilities to pursue career opportunities with the company and receive on-the-job training.

MERCK
INVENTING FOR LIFE

— CASE STUDY —
ABOUT MERCK

Merck is a global healthcare leader working to help the world be well. Through their precision medicines, vaccines, biologic therapies and general health products, they work with customers and partners to make their lives meaningful by better managing health conditions. They also demonstrate their commitment to increasing access to healthcare through their social impact programs, employee and volunteerism.

FOUNDED IN 1893

OPERATES IN MORE THAN
140
COUNTRIES

HAS APPROXIMATELY
69,000
EMPLOYEES

88 MILLION
PEOPLE REACHED THROUGH THEIR
MAJOR PROGRAMS AND PARTNERSHIPS

DISABILITY BY THE NUMBERS

1 in 9 Americans self-identify as having a disability

More than 1 in 10 people with disabilities disrupted a service provider because of barriers encountered.

THE GOAL To make Merck's internal and external digital properties inclusive and disability friendly.

THE SOLUTION

Merck is working with eSSENTIAL Accessibility to implement a comprehensive accessibility solution, which includes:

- Assistive Technology**
eSSENTIAL Accessibility provides Merck with a comprehensive accessibility solution that includes assistive technology, content and external website for content, and a comprehensive training program, providing a ready-to-go solution.
- Brand Quality Checks**
Merck's website and the organization's other digital content is designed for the future. They have no brand quality checks. The great Merck the organization is committed through brand quality and diversity center opportunities and inclusion being a priority, inclusive and accessible and the brand's website with disabilities.
- Digital Resources & Services**
Technical and functional testing to ensure digital content compliance and the use of Merck's digital content on Merck's website to ensure WCAG 2.0 Level AA. The organization and Merck's website to ensure WCAG 2.0 Level AA compliance and ensure open compliance of the website.



"We are pleased to join this important coalition of organizations that are working together to empower people with different abilities by making inclusivity the norm."

Are You Ready to Give Patients with Disabilities a Barrier-Free Digital Experience?

Request a demo of eSEnTIAL Accessibility now.



Phone: (416) 364-2501
Toll Free: 1 (866) 333-3909
Fax: (416) 466-4452