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Are government websites fully accessible to the disabled?

November 15, 2009 — 9:25pm ET | By Judi Hasson

Editor's Corner:

There's a federal law--the Rehabilitation Act--requiring that federal agencies' electronic and information technology be accessible to people with disabilities. It's a law that every agency must take seriously, but many are falling short of the requirements to make web access fully available for 54 million Americans with disabilities.



We report this week on the continuing struggles of the government to comply with the law. While most agencies are in general compliance, there are gaps with the rapid changes in technology and wider use of new online tools.

In the past year, there have been accessibility complaints from disability rights activists regarding Recovery.gov, WhiteHouse.gov, Data.gov, and MakingHomeAffordable.gov. There also have been alleged problems regarding the websites for the Social Security Administration, the Small Business Administration and the Education Department. Under Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, accommodations must be made for people with sight, hearing, cognition, medical condition or mobility problems. That means, for example, that there must be a way for a blind person to understand what's on the web using Braille, and for a deaf person to have captions to read what is being broadcast.

There's is a serious effort underway to make sure federal websites are in

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TAGS

- Section 508
- General Services Administration
- government websites
- Americans With Disabilities

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compliance. The IT Accessibility & Workforce Division in the U.S. General Services Administration's Office has been charged with the task of educating federal employees and building the infrastructure necessary to support the mandate of the law.

The GSA has many tools available for agencies, and is seeking to provide educational opportunities. On Nov. 17, GSA will host a conference showing products from Research In Motion, the creators of the BlackBerry. The company will demonstrate a number of accessibility solutions available for BlackBerry smartphones, including those for the blind, the visually impaired, the colorblind, the hard of hearing, the deaf, and those with cognitive and/or mobility impairments. GSA says this is "a must attend event for all who have BlackBerrys, want an accessible BlackBerry and support those that use BlackBerrys."

The task of making online services and information accessible to the disabled has increased with the wider use of websites and now with the Obama administration's extended use of the web to increase government transparency. As the government moves ahead at a rapid pace, it also has an obligation to make the requirements of the Rehabilitation Act and Section 508 a living, working option for the many people in and out of government with disabilities. - Judi

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