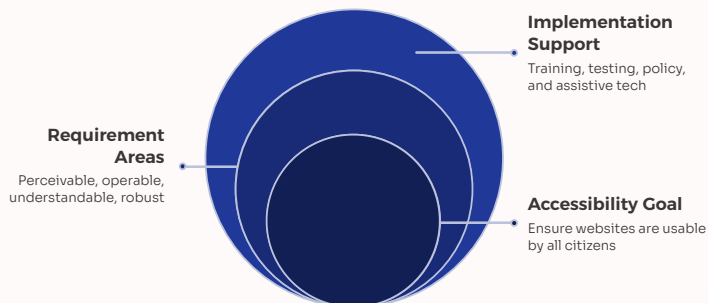


Summary of New Federal Accessibility Laws: WCAG and Section 508 Compliance for Small Town and County Websites

Understanding the new requirements for making government websites accessible to all citizens, including those with disabilities.



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Introduction: Why Accessibility Matters for Small Governments



Over 285 million people worldwide have visual impairments, and millions more experience hearing, cognitive, or physical disabilities. Federal laws now ensure that government websites and digital content are accessible to all users, regardless of their abilities.

Small towns and counties face unique challenges due to limited budgets and technical staff, but compliance with accessibility standards is essential to provide equitable access to public services. These regulations aren't just legal requirements—they represent a commitment to serving every member of your community.



Visual Impairments

Screen readers and text alternatives enable access for blind and low-vision users



Hearing Disabilities

Captions and transcripts make audio and video content accessible



Cognitive Differences

Clear structure and simple language improve comprehension



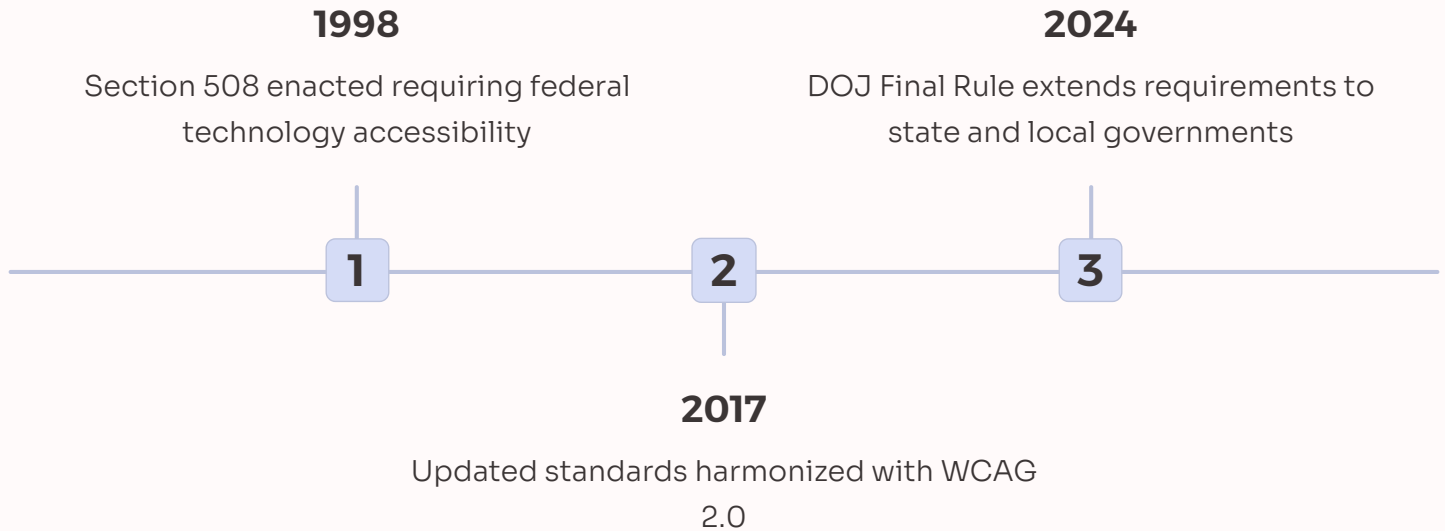
Motor Limitations

Keyboard navigation ensures access without a mouse

Overview of Section 508 Compliance

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, amended in 1998, requires federal electronic and information technology to be accessible to people with disabilities. While it applies directly to federal agencies, it significantly influences state and local governments, especially those receiving federal funding.

The U.S. Access Board updated Section 508 standards in 2017, harmonizing them with WCAG 2.0 guidelines to create a unified approach to digital accessibility.



Key Section 508 Standards

Keyboard Operability

All website functions must be accessible using only a keyboard, without requiring a mouse or touch input

Color Independence

Color cannot be the sole means of conveying information—text or icons must accompany color coding

Multimedia Captions

All audio and video content requires captions and transcripts for deaf and hard-of-hearing users

Semantic Markup

Proper HTML structure enables screen readers and assistive technologies to interpret content correctly

Section 508 standards cover a wide range of digital content including websites, software applications, multimedia presentations, and electronic documents such as PDFs.

The DOJ's 2024 Final Rule on Web Accessibility for State and Local Governments

On April 24, 2024, the Department of Justice published a landmark Final Rule updating Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to explicitly require accessible websites and mobile applications. This rule adopts WCAG 2.1 Level AA as the technical standard, encompassing 50 success criteria for accessibility. (<https://www.ada.gov/resources/2024-03-08-web-rule/>)

The rule applies to all state and local government websites and mobile applications, including those operated by small towns and counties. This represents a significant expansion of accessibility requirements beyond federal agencies.

Text Alternatives

All images must include descriptive alt text that conveys the same information to screen reader users

Color Contrast

Minimum contrast ratio of 4.5:1 for normal text and 3:1 for large text ensures readability

Keyboard Navigation

All interactive elements must be reachable and operable using keyboard alone with visible focus indicators

Additional Requirements

- Accessible forms with clear labels and error identification
- Captioning for live and prerecorded videos
- Semantic HTML and ARIA roles for meaningful content structure
- Resizable text without loss of functionality
- Consistent navigation and predictable interactions

Compliance Deadlines

1

April 24, 2026

Governments serving 50,000+ people

2

April 24, 2027

Governments serving fewer than 50,000 people

Specific Considerations for PDFs and Electronic Documents



PDFs represent a significant accessibility challenge for small governments. Many legacy documents were created without accessibility in mind, but the new rules require that PDFs be properly tagged with semantic structure and readable by screen readers.

Simply scanning paper documents to PDF is not sufficient for compliance. Text must be selectable, searchable, and properly structured using PDF tagging standards.

01

Proper PDF Tagging

Documents must include semantic tags defining headings, paragraphs, lists, and tables for screen readers

02

Searchable Text

All text must be selectable and searchable; scanned images require OCR (Optical Character Recognition)

03

Color Contrast

PDFs must follow the same 4.5:1 contrast guidelines as websites and not rely solely on color

04

Accessible Forms

Form fields embedded in PDFs require accessible labels, instructions, and error messages

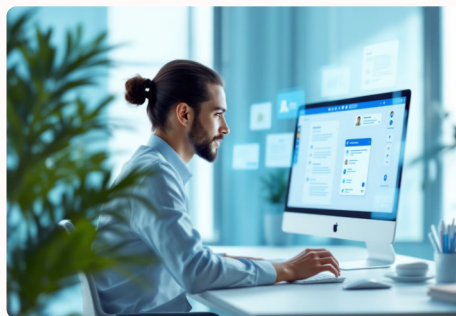


Reading Order

Content must follow a logical reading order that makes sense when read linearly by assistive technology

06

 **Good news for small governments:** The rule allows some exceptions for pre-existing conventional electronic documents, but encourages transition to accessible formats. Prioritize making your most-used documents accessible first, such as permit applications, and public meeting agendas.



Color and Visual Design Compliance

Color usage is one of the most common accessibility issues on government websites. The new regulations establish clear requirements for how color can and cannot be used to convey information.



Color as Information

Never use color alone to convey meaning—always include text, icons, or patterns



Contrast Ratios

Maintain minimum contrast ratios for all text and interface elements



Testing Tools

Use automated tools to verify contrast across your entire website

Minimum Contrast Requirements

Content Type	Minimum Ratio	Example
Normal text (under 18pt)	4.5:1	Black on white: 21:1 ✓
Large text (18pt+ or 14pt+ bold)	3:1	Dark gray on white: 7:1 ✓
User interface components	3:1	Button borders and icons
Graphical objects	3:1	Charts, diagrams, and infographics

What Needs Contrast Compliance

- Body text and headings
- Navigation links and buttons
- Form field borders and labels
- Error messages and alerts
- Icons and graphical elements
- Chart elements and data visualizations

Practical Steps for Small Governments

1. Audit your current color schemes using free contrast checkers
2. Update CSS stylesheets with compliant colors
3. Test your site in grayscale to identify color-only information
4. Document your color palette for consistency
5. Train staff on contrast requirements

Semantic Documentation and Coding Best Practices

Semantic HTML forms the foundation of an accessible website. By using proper HTML elements and structure, you enable assistive technologies to interpret and navigate your content effectively. This is one of the most important—and often overlooked—aspects of web accessibility.



Semantic HTML Elements

Use proper heading hierarchy (H1-H6), lists (UL, OL), and landmark elements (HEADER, NAV, MAIN, FOOTER) to provide meaningful page structure



ARIA Roles & Properties

Accessible Rich Internet Applications (ARIA) attributes enhance accessibility for dynamic content and custom widgets



Proper Labeling

Every form field, button, and link requires clear, descriptive labels that explain their purpose

Essential Semantic Practices

Heading Hierarchy

```
<h1>Page Title</h1>
<h2>Main Section</h2>
  <h3>Subsection</h3>
  <h3>Subsection</h3>
<h2>Main Section</h2>
```

Never skip heading levels. Screen reader users navigate by headings, so logical structure is critical.

Form Labels

```
<label for="email">Email Address:</label>
<input type="email" id="email"
  name="email" required
  aria-describedby="email-help">
<span id="email-help">
  We'll never share your email
</span>
```

Associate labels with inputs using for and id attributes.

01

Use Tables Only for Data

Never use tables for page layout. Reserve them for tabular data with proper <th> headers and scope attributes

03

Alternative Text

Every image needs alt text describing its content or purpose. Decorative images should use alt=""

05

02

Descriptive Link Text

Links should make sense out of context. Use "Download 2024 Budget Report" instead of "Click here"

04

Landmark Regions

Use HTML5 landmarks (<header>, <nav>, <main>, <aside>, <footer>) to define page regions

-  **Recommendation for small governments:** Prioritize training for website administrators or consulting with accessibility experts who can implement these practices. A well-structured website from the start is far easier to maintain than retrofitting accessibility later.

We specialize in creating compliant websites and training you on how to maintain it (or we can do that for you too!)



Exceptions, Flexibility, and Challenges for Small Governments



The DOJ recognizes the unique burden on small governments and provides accommodations. Jurisdictions serving fewer than 50,000 people receive an extra year to comply—until April 24, 2027. However, this extension doesn't eliminate the requirement; it simply provides more time to implement necessary changes.

Content Exemptions

Archived Content

Content that is no longer current, updated, or referenced is exempt, but frequently accessed archives must still be accessible

Pre-existing Documents

Some conventional electronic documents created before the compliance date may be grandfathered, though transition to accessible formats is encouraged

Third-Party Content

Content from external sources may be exempt under certain conditions, but governments remain responsible for their own content

Individualized Documents

Password-protected documents created for specific individuals may have different requirements

- ❏ **Important limitation:** Alternate means of access, such as offering telephone support in lieu of an accessible website, are **not** considered sufficient substitutes for web accessibility. Your digital content must be directly accessible to all users.

Common Challenges and Solutions

Challenge	Recommended Approach
Limited budget	Prioritize high-traffic pages and essential services; seek free resources and training
No technical staff	Use website builders with accessibility features; hire consultants for audits and training
Legacy documents	Create new accessible versions for most-requested documents; use phased approach
Third-party vendors	Require accessibility commitments in contracts; test vendor-provided content
Ongoing maintenance	Develop internal policies; train all content creators; schedule regular audits

Enforcement and Legal Implications

Noncompliance with accessibility requirements carries serious legal and financial consequences. The Department of Justice enforces Title II ADA compliance for state and local governments, and accessibility lawsuits have increased dramatically in recent years.

\$50K

First Violation

Maximum civil penalty for initial noncompliance

\$100K

Subsequent Violations

Maximum penalty for repeat offenses

300%

Lawsuit Increase

Growth in accessibility lawsuits over the past five years

Potential Consequences of Noncompliance

Legal Action

Individuals can file lawsuits or complaints with the DOJ, leading to investigations and enforcement actions

Injunctive Relief

Courts can order immediate remediation of accessibility barriers and ongoing compliance monitoring

Monetary Damages

Compensatory damages to individuals harmed by inaccessible content, plus attorney fees

Civil Penalties

Financial penalties up to \$50,000 for first violation and \$100,000 for subsequent violations

Beyond Legal Compliance

Accessibility improvements offer benefits beyond avoiding lawsuits:

- **Universal usability:** Accessible websites are easier for everyone to use, including elderly residents and those with temporary disabilities
- **Mobile optimization:** Many accessibility features improve mobile experiences
- **Search engine optimization:** Semantic markup and alt text improve search rankings
- **Public trust:** Demonstrating commitment to inclusion strengthens community relationships
- **Future-proofing:** Accessible websites are more maintainable and adaptable

Resources and Next Steps for Small Towns and Counties

Achieving accessibility compliance may seem daunting, but numerous resources exist to help small governments navigate these requirements. Taking action now positions your municipality for successful compliance by the 2027 deadline.

01

Review Official Guidance

Study the DOJ's Final Rule and Fact Sheet on ADA Web Accessibility (April 2024) and consult [Section508.gov](https://www.section508.gov) for detailed standards

02

Conduct Accessibility Audit

Use automated and manual testing tools to identify current accessibility barriers on your website and documents

03

Prioritize Remediation

Focus on high-traffic pages, essential services, and the most significant barriers first; create a phased implementation plan

04

Build Internal Capacity

Train staff or hire consultants knowledgeable in WCAG 2.1 Level AA and Section 508 requirements

05

Establish Ongoing Monitoring

Develop an accessibility statement, create internal policies, and schedule regular audits to maintain compliance

Essential Resources

Government Resources

- **Section508.gov:** Technical guidance and testing tools
- **ADA.gov:** DOJ guidance and compliance information
- **WebAIM.org:** Free training and evaluation tools
- **W3C WAI:** WCAG documentation and tutorials
- **DHS Trusted Tester:** Free certification program

Testing Tools

- **WAVE:** Browser extension for quick accessibility checks
- **axe DevTools:** Automated testing for developers
- **NVDA/JAWS:** Screen readers for manual testing
- **Color Contrast Analyzers:** Verify contrast ratios
- **PAC 3:** PDF accessibility checker

What's Next?



Create Accessibility Statement

Publish a statement acknowledging your commitment, providing contact information for accessibility issues, and outlining your compliance timeline



Develop Policies

Establish internal procedures ensuring all new content meets accessibility standards before publication



Engage Your Community

Solicit feedback from residents with disabilities to identify priority improvements and test your solutions

 **Contact NavigateTomorrow for personalized guidance and assistance.** We specialize in helping small towns and counties achieve accessibility compliance within budget constraints. Our team can provide audits, training, remediation support, and ongoing monitoring services tailored to your specific needs and timeline.

Accessibility compliance is not just a legal obligation—it's an opportunity to better serve your entire community. By starting now and taking a thoughtful, phased approach, small governments can meet these requirements while building more inclusive, user-friendly digital services for all residents.

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