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2003 NASCIO Recognition Awards
Category: Accessibility & Participation

North Dakota Web Accessibility

Executive Summary

The North Dakota Information technology Department (ITD) created an ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) Work Group consisting of representatives from several agencies and a consumer representative to review and address the issues of accessibility and technology.   The ADA Work Group drafted a policy for the development of accessible web pages by state agencies, which was adopted by the state on September 25, 2001. "*The purpose of this policy is to establish accessibility requirements by which state entities shall ensure that all individuals enjoy the same right, privileges, advantages, or opportunities when accessing electronically available state information, benefit, or service.*" North Dakota adopted as policy, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines created and recommended by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) (**http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/**).   Compliance with the W3C Guidelines is based on the satisfaction of specific checkpoints. The Double-A Conformance Level is the required level of compliance for North Dakota web sites and all sites shall be compliant by June 30, 2001.

To promote awareness and compliance Three educational programs on web accessibility have been conducted and an assistive technology expo was presented which demonstrated various items of assistive technology. Periodic notices were also sent to agencies reminding them of the accessibility requirements. As of this date, most agencies web sites should be accessible to all persons by the June 30, 2003, compliance date. Agencies with sites that are not fully accessible are to have a plan on file identifying its compliance activities and date of compliance.

A) Description of the project

As the state of North Dakota moves towards E-government and the electronic distribution and availability of government services, products, and information, accessibility for people with disabilities is a critical issue. Although more people have access to information tools such as personal computers and the Internet, one in six North Dakotan have some type of disability and find themselves excluded due to the inaccessibility of the information technology product. Inaccessible web sites, software that is incompatible with assistive devices, voice-automated systems that cannot be accessed by adaptive telephones, and other access barriers exclude people with disabilities from digital government.

North Dakota through ITD's leadership has chosen to take a proactive role in ensuring E-government services are accessible to all citizens. ITD is a separate agency under the Office of the Governor; the ITD director is the North Dakota Chief Information Officer (CIO) and a member of the Governor's cabinet. ITD, with input from state entities, is responsible for the development of IT standards, policies, and guidelines. In the summer of 2000, ITD was asked what it was doing about ADA requirements and state web sites. It was pointed out that no state sites were currently accessible. This sparked interest in the Planning and Policy Division and they started to ask, "What does ADA mean to technology?"

An ADA Work Group was organized by ITD to address the accessibility issues. The mission of this ADA Work Group is: "To identify the ADA issues as they pertain to technology and identify or develop necessary assistive technology policy." Membership of this group consisted of representation from the North Dakota Interagency Program for Assistive Technology (IPAT), Protection & Advocacy, Department of Human Services, Central Personnel, Higher Education, Consumers, and ITD. The members of this group have a strong familiarity with accessibility issues and have identified four major technology areas – web development, telecommunications, hardware, and software – for which policy or guidelines are to be developed. Work of the ADA Work Group is augmented with technical assistance and advise from ITD division personnel on the various technical issues.

Employees and customers of this state should not experience barriers to accessing services through web pages. The state is moving towards e-commerce as the major infrastructure of service delivery and is therefore obligated to adhere to the ADA. Web developers should consider those who use screen readers or text enlargement programs. The barriers to web pages are most apparent to those individuals who may use screen readers or other hardware and software for speech output and enlarged text and those with cognitive or learning impairments who may not fully comprehend the written text. The integration of equipment to navigate web pages may be too difficult when web pages do not have descriptions of the graphical images, and have colors and backgrounds that are too busy, etc. The information contained should not

rely solely on one modality such as an auditory or graphical presentation so that a format is responsive to various sensory, physical or cognitive needs.

On September 25, 2001, the ADA Work Group's Accessible Web Development policy (DP005-01 (http://www.state.nd.us/ea/standards/policies)) was presented to the Standards and Policy Review Group and approved. This policy establishes accessibility requirements by which state entities shall ensure that all individuals enjoy the same rights, privileges, advantages, or opportunities when accessing electronically available state information, benefit, or service.

All web-based information and services provided on Inter/Intra/Extranet sites by North Dakota State government entities must be designed to be accessible pursuant to federal and state law. This includes any web "pages", and scripted or programmed content such as online registration programs, electronic filing, tutorials, email access, etc.

In light of the rapid growth and change in web development and assistive technology, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines created and recommended by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) have been adopted as the North Dakota policy for the development of accessible web pages. The primary goal of these guidelines is to promote accessibility and by following them, North Dakota web content will be accessible to all users.

Compliance with the W3C Content Guidelines is based on the satisfaction of specific checkpoints. 3 levels of conformance define satisfaction of the checkpoints.
> Conformance Level "A": Priority 1 checkpoints are satisfied.
> Conformance Level "Double-A": Priority 1 & 2 checkpoints are satisfied.
> Conformance Level "Triple-A": Priority 1, 2, & 3 checkpoints are satisfied.

The Double-A conformance level is the required level of compliance of all North Dakota web sites.

To ensure progress towards compliance, target dates were established as follows:
- All *new web sites* developed and implemented *after September 1, 2001, must be compliant* with the W3C Web Content Guidelines.
- The maintenance of agency *existing sites* shall provide for their *compliance with W3C Web Content Guidelines by June 30, 2003.*

To promote the awareness of web accessibility, three ADA and web accessibility educational program have been conducted, an assistive technology expo was presented which provided demonstrations of various items of assistive technology. Periodic notices were sent to agencies reminding them of the accessibility requirement. Beginning March 2003, complete reviews of agency

web sites were done using the WatchFire web accessibility utility, Bobby. These Bobby reports were made available to agencies. Agency web site compliance is going very well and by June 30 most agencies will have accessible web sites.

b) Significance to the improvement of the operations of government

Since the initial policy planning discussions of the ADA Work Group a greater awareness of the meaning of accessible web technology has been created and the understanding that electronic services must be equally accessible to all persons. In the year 2000 no sites were accessible. Now, there is a better understanding of accessibility and by June 30, 2003 most agency sites will be compliant.

To not make a reasonable effort to make state services accessible to all North Dakota citizens would be a failure to serve approximately 20% of North Dakota citizenry.

C) Benefits

People with disabilities are the segment of the population that is affected the most by technology. Accessible technology can make services and information equally available and can promote the independence of a person with disabilities.

A realization of the difficulties of the disabled and the role that we can play through technology to improve the availability of state services and information.

Accessibility is not a limitation on web site design but can actually provides for a cleaner, more effective web site.

D) Return on investment

Determining the actual return on investment is a difficult thing to do – providing the services of the state in a manner that is accessible to all citizens is the right thing to do. There is however, a statutory requirement and that could subject the state to lawsuits due to the inaccessibility of its web sites. By making a determined effort to provide its services in the most accessible manner, the state maintains a positive image of providing services to all thereby minimizing the possibilities of such lawsuits.

The compliance date of June 30, 2003, was approximately two years from the implementation of the Accessible Web Development policy. It was the objective of the ADA Work Group that the updates of the web sites could be accomplished through the normal web maintenance process. Agency resources may have been redirected as some agencies used this opportunity to redesign the web site

however most costs occurred through the course of regular updates so added cost was minimal.

In summary, this was a very low-cost project that benefited North Dakota's citizens and portrays a positive image of state government.