

Empathy Lab

Improving Technology Accessibility for All



CATEGORY

Digital Experience:
Enterprise Solutions

START DATE

June 2023

END DATE

September 2024



COLORADO

Governor's Office of
Information Technology

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Empathy Lab, an initiative spearheaded by the Colorado Governor's Office of Information Technology (OIT), is a strategic response to OIT's Wildly Important Goal (WIG) #5: Improve Technology Accessibility. Recognizing that equitable digital services are essential for all Coloradans, especially the 1 in 4 adults living with a disability and other marginalized groups, the Empathy Lab introduces a three-pronged approach to inclusive design. It includes a [Digital Accessibility Workshop](#), a [Community Steering Committee \(CSC\)](#), and a Lived Experiences Library—all structured to create a culture of empathy and accessibility in state digital services. Through storytelling, first-hand demonstrations, and inclusive dialogues, the Empathy Lab is making significant strides toward accessible, inclusive and equitable digital products and services for all.

IDEA

We find ourselves in an ever-changing and expanding remote and digital world where services and resources need to be available online and without barriers. Unfortunately, that is not always the case for the [1,015,417 adults in Colorado who have a disability](#) (equal to 20% or 1 in 5 adults).

Many times, it is not a blatant disregard for people with disabilities or other historically marginalized communities but rather a lack of understanding and awareness by those who are creating and managing these digital spaces.

It may sound simple, but leveraging technology to put ourselves in the shoes of all who want or need to use the digital services and resources we offer can do wonders for accessibility and equitable design—and for making state government services available to all.

The Empathy Lab is a virtual inclusion and awareness hub dedicated to fostering empathy and enhancing digital accessibility across Colorado's public sector. It addresses barriers faced by historically marginalized communities, including people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, rural residents, seniors, LGBTQ+ individuals, English language learners, those experiencing homelessness and others.

The initiative is grounded in human-centered design and inclusivity, aiming to put digital creators in the shoes of those who often face technological barriers. We achieved this through the following components:

- **Community Steering Committee (CSC):** A 10-member panel that includes individuals from historically marginalized communities, offering direct feedback and insights to OIT and its partners.
 - The CSC represents Colorado's diversity and is paramount to the Empathy Lab's work. In this two-minute [Centering Empathy: Stories from Coloradans with Diverse Lived Experiences](#) video, CSC members share their stories to spread awareness and understanding of the “why” behind designing more inclusive and equitable digital products. It is an excellent example of how to bring a video to life for those with visual disabilities.
- **Digital Accessibility Workshop (DAW):** A virtual learning space that includes hands-on exercises to demonstrate the impact of accessibility (or lack thereof) across various digital formats.
 - The DAW is a fun and interactive way to discover the challenges people with certain disabilities, including dyslexia and color blindness, encounter when websites are not accessible. It includes interactive exercises across eight topics that show, rather than tell, how people uniquely experience web pages, forms, colors, multimedia, and more. Elements of the DAW were informed by input from CSC members.
- **Lived Experiences Library:** A platform that provides a space for CSC members to share personal stories and real-life experiences to promote understanding and design empathy. Designed to kickstart conversations that can challenge stereotypes and prejudices through dialogue. The concept is based on [The Human Library®](#), which is a global innovative and hands-on learning platform.

To help ensure our success and further the common goal of developing inclusive, accessible technology, we created a partnership with representatives from historically marginalized communities that have experienced barriers to digital technology and products.

Colorado's [Digital Government Strategic Plan](#) lays out the necessary steps to make accessing government easier for all Coloradans, especially those who experience more barriers to the technology we provide. Some of those steps include:

1. Design services and implement technology solutions around the life experiences of residents.
2. Harness user-backed research and data to improve resident journeys and outcomes.
3. Develop initiatives to address equity gaps.
4. Continue to meaningfully engage local stakeholders.

Implementing a virtual Empathy Lab helps us explore how OIT can advance this goal by way of a [Community Steering Committee](#) (CSC). We don't want to stop at what's required, but continue to innovate to ensure that digital government is inclusive and equitable.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Empathy Lab was born out of a need to meet our customers where they are. The TAP team secured a Statewide Internet Portal Authority (SIPA) grant and the project rolled out in phases, starting with the selection and onboarding of CSC members in July 2023. The project was officially announced that October during the TAP Open Office Hours meetings, and via newsletters and email messaging.

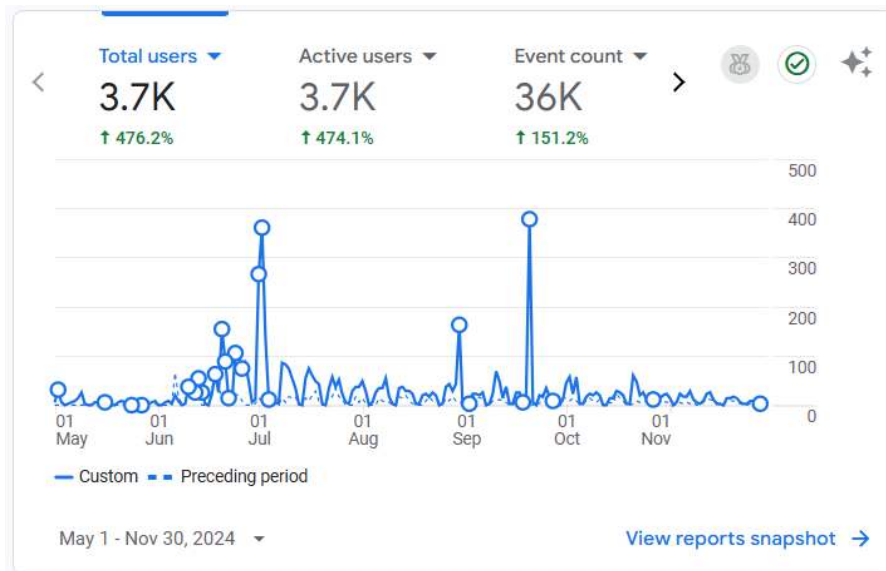
The Empathy Lab includes the following three components:

Community Steering Committee (CSC) - Implemented July 2023

- The TAP team put out the request for applications and members were carefully selected to represent the diversity of Coloradans.
- The CSC is composed of non-state employees in historically marginalized communities that have experienced barriers to digital technology and products. ([CSC member bios](#))
- It provides continuous, real-time feedback and perspectives for better digital design.

Digital Accessibility Workshop - Implemented November 2023 & June 2024

- Starting in April of 2023, a dedicated project manager worked with a vendor for technical support to complete the initial DAW in under six months.
- The DAW was built using the existing Google platform framework to develop a website and 32 exercises across eight topic areas.
- In November 2023, the DAW was rolled out to state employees. It was subsequently made available to the public in June 2024.
- During 2024, the DAW was expanded to include refreshed exercises and promoted to drive increased traffic:



Lived Experiences Library - Implemented September 2024

- A designated TAP team member spearheaded the Lived Experiences Library project using previously secured grant money. The Library opened for business to state agencies in September 2024, and we had an immediate response for engagements.
- The Library offers storytelling, direct feedback and conversations between CSC members and state agencies. The TAP team facilitates these interactions which include one-on-one, group and panel discussions.
- Library participants provide insight into user experience, barriers, and best practices. The TAP team offers pre- and post-session packages to help agencies track impact and accountability.

We continue to socialize the Empathy Lab through a variety of communications channels, including newsletters (internal to OIT, to state employees and targeted to those interested in accessibility), social media and more.

IMPACT

The Empathy Lab has made early strides in elevating accessibility awareness and practice within Colorado's government. Key impacts include:

- **Improved Design Awareness:** Teams are now better equipped to recognize and address accessibility issues.
- **Human-Centered Feedback:** Direct stories and insights from CSC members drive more relevant and empathetic digital designs.

- **Training Evolution:** TAP's training strategy has been enriched through real-life examples and firsthand user experiences.
- **Cultural Shift:** Agencies now view digital accessibility not just as a legal requirement, but a human-centered imperative.

The **Empathy Lab** is not a one-time campaign, but a long-term cultural transformation. As the program matures, future phases will:

- Expand engagement to customer service and HR teams.
- Strengthen data collection and impact measurement.
- Broaden reach to more state agencies and counties.
- Reinforce inclusive practices across all state digital products.

The **Digital Accessibility Workshop**, available to the public from our [Empathy Lab webpage](#). It is a powerful and interactive way to gain insight into what people with certain disabilities - including low vision, dyslexia and color blindness - experience when interacting with websites, videos, forms and documents. We received these comments from two of the **more than 4,000 visitors**:

“Really enjoyed this training, makes it super clear how lack of care for accessibility can impact the user experience.”

“This was an excellent training! Thank you for developing this tool to help teach us to create accessible tools and content. It helped me identify things that I have used in the past that weren't accessible so that I have a place to start in changing my digital communication habits.”

The Workshop is used as an educational tool, as was done by a team within the Colorado Department of Education. The supervisor found value in her team completing the exercises, and the OIT TAP team saw increases across views (256%), new users (533%), and event counts (220%). Additionally, a University of Denver instructor shared that they have made the Workshop a key part of their curriculum to help them understand digital accessibility better, noting, "...your work is making a positive impact on future designers.”

The **Lived Experiences Library** was launched for state agencies in September 2024. Through storytelling, user experience feedback, and assistive technology demonstrations by people who experience accessibility barriers, this library provides powerful insights for creating inclusive and innovative digital products. Here are a few highlights from the **30 engagements with 10 different state agencies** include the following:

- Agency staff have worked to incorporate lived experiences in their design process.
- Document accessibility demonstration showing the importance of proper heading structure, tags, reading order and alternative text.
- Making the procurement process more accessible and inclusive.
- Providing insights on accommodations and support to improve processes when users need assistance.
- A more accessible rules portal informed by user experience.
- Other agencies and states such as South Carolina have expressed interest in replicating the Lived Experiences Library because of the impact it has already made in Colorado.

By embedding lived experiences and empathetic design into digital workflows, Colorado is taking a meaningful step toward digital equity. The Empathy Lab is more than a training tool—it is a testament to the state's commitment to every person's right to access and opportunity.

The Empathy Lab represents a progressive, human-centered approach to digital accessibility. By combining structured learning, real-life experiences, and community engagement, OIT is building a sustainable model for inclusive digital government. With continued support, thoughtful expansion, and a deep commitment to inclusion, the Empathy Lab is poised to become a cornerstone of Colorado's digital future.

Due to the success of the Empathy Lab project, we are soliciting a new grant to continue this important work in the form of a mobile Empathy Exploratorium Circuit.