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Accelerating equity: Michigan's digital accessibility transformation

Award: National Association of State Chief Information Officers (NASCIO)
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Category: Digital Experience – Agency/Program

State: Michigan

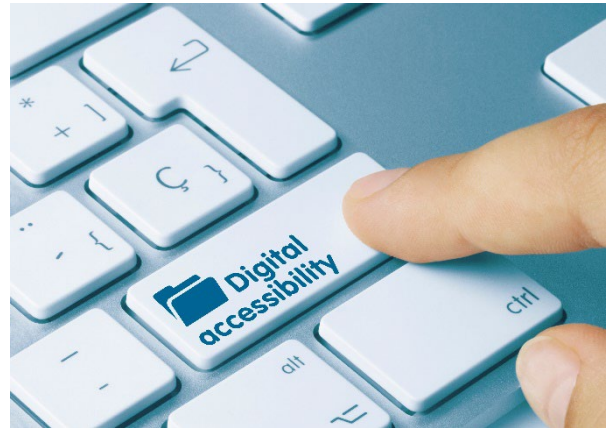
Project Start: January 2024

Project End: Ongoing (compliance deadline: April 2027)

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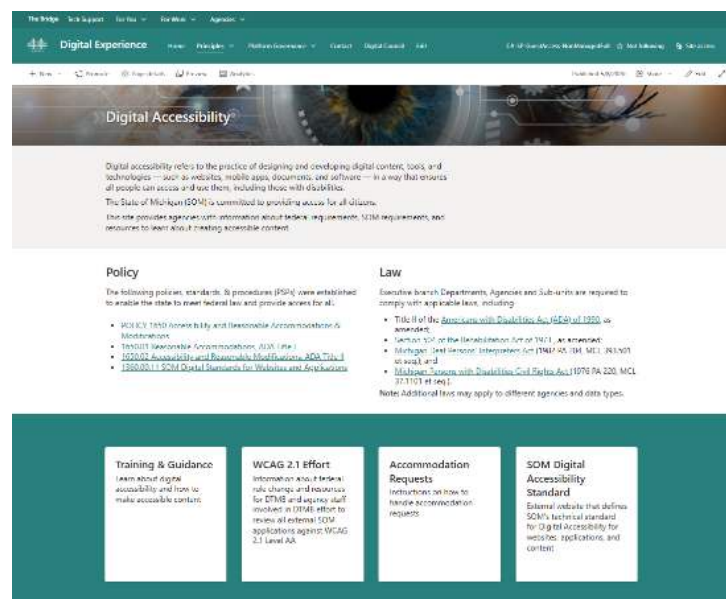
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2024, the State of Michigan launched a transformative enterprise initiative to ensure that every public-facing website and mobile application complies with the U.S. Department of Justice's revised ADA Title II regulations, which formally establish WCAG 2.1 Level AA as the technical standard for state and local governments, with full compliance required by April 24, 2026 (now 2027). Led by a cross-functional Department of Technology, Management & Budget (DTMB) team, the effort spans hundreds of digital services used by over 10 million residents. It combines centralized funding, specialized staffing, automated and manual testing, policy updates, and integrated governance to accelerate remediation and prevent future accessibility debt.



Michigan proactively began testing against WCAG 2.1 AA in January 2024 to provide feedback to development teams prior to the policy change. In May of 2024, Michigan adopted WCAG 2.1 AA as the statewide standard – aligning enterprise policy and digital standards with federal requirements. With a \$3 million dollar work project and a multi-year roadmap, Michigan is modernizing digital services to deliver equitable, reliable access – particularly for the more than 2.3 million residents with disabilities, while reducing legal exposure and strengthening trust in government.

Michigan's digital accessibility transformation also included a strong investment in statewide workforce training and crossagency coordination. The Michigan Department of Civil Rights (MDCR) has expanded digital accessibility training for all employees; covering accessible content creation, inclusive design practices, assistive technology awareness, and accessibility responsibilities under ADA Title II. In parallel, the state created a statewide Digital Accessibility Agency Liaison (DAAL) network and designated accessibility leads embedded in agencies to operationalize compliance, coordinate remediation, and serve as accessibility champions. Together, these elements ensure Michigan not only meets the updated ADA Title II requirements but institutionalizes accessibility as a core public service value.



Screenshot of State of Michigan Digital Accessibility Site for staff.

IDEA

What problems or opportunities does the project address?

Michigan delivers hundreds of public facing digital services used by more than 10 million residents for critical needs including benefits access, licensing, public safety, and health programs. Prior to 2024, accessibility compliance varied widely across agencies. Some systems aligned to WCAG 2.0, while others relied on outdated technology. The U.S. Department of Justice's updated ADA Title II rule requires all external facing websites, applications, and mobile apps, regardless of age or platform, to meet WCAG 2.1 AA by April 2026 (now April 2027).

The state now faced an enterprise scale challenge: inventorying all digital services, evaluating every system against new federal standards, and remediating hundreds of applications within an aggressive timeframe. This mandate created a rare opportunity to modernize Michigan's digital government, reduce longstanding accessibility debt, and improve digital equity statewide.

Why does it matter?

Accessible digital services are a civil rights imperative, enabling equitable access for more than 2.3 million Michiganders with disabilities. Barriers in online forms, mobile apps, or service portals can directly limit access to healthcare, safety benefits, employment resources, licensing, and public information. Without action, Michigan risked exclusions for residents, legal exposure, and inconsistent service quality across agencies.

Meeting the new ADA Title II requirements ensure every resident, regardless of disability, device, or agency touchpoint, can reliably access the services they need. The initiative enhanced internal preparedness by broadening statewide accessibility training via MDCR and establishing new local accountability frameworks.



Describe what makes the project innovative or distinct from similar initiatives.

Michigan's approach is distinguished by its depth, scale, and sustainability. The state established a cross-functional core team of IT leaders to guide the strategy; expanded the centralized accessibility testing team; integrated accessibility into procurement, design, and development workflows; and adopted WCAG 2.1 AA as a statewide standard ahead of federal deadlines.

Michigan also created two enterprise-wide structures that set it apart:

- Single Points of Contact (SPOCs): Designated leads within each DTMB agency support area who own system identification, accessibility review coordination, remediation tracking, and timely communication with testing teams. This ensured clear accountability across over five hundred systems.
- Digital Accessibility Agency Liaison (DAAL) Network: Accessibility leads embedded within every department who support remediation, guide local teams, and serve as agency based champions of digital equity.

Together with expanded enterprise training from MDCR, these structures formed a reproducible, scalable governance model for accessibility transformation.

What makes it universal?

Every state and local government must comply with the ADA Title II final rule and meet WCAG 2.1, Level AA throughout their digital ecosystems. Michigan's blueprint including centralized testing, decentralized agency liaisons, standardized governance, procurement integration, data-driven prioritization, and continuous training is directly transferable to states facing similar challenges.

The initiative also aligns with NASCIO State CIO priorities including digital government, constituent experience, modernization, cybersecurity/risk management, and workforce development – making it universally relevant and widely adoptable.

IMPLEMENTATION

What was the roadmap and how does this project fit into an enterprise view?

Michigan’s implementation began with an enterprise inventory using the State of Michigan Master Systems List to identify all systems requiring assessment. Applications were prioritized by usage, risk, and accessibility complexity.

This enabled a structured, multi-year roadmap including:

- Adoption of WCAG 2.1 AA as the statewide standard.
- Hiring specialized accessibility testers and establishing a standard testing process that ensured full coverage of WCAG 2.1 AA criteria.
- Integrating accessibility into procurement requirements.
- Conducting initial and follow-up reviews of 500+ systems.
- Publishing enterprise dashboards to monitor progress.
- Establishing remediation timelines aligned to federal deadlines.
- Incorporating centralized IT coordination for all twenty State of Michigan Agencies.

Success was defined by measurable criteria: number of systems reviewed, ratio of systems remediated, backlog elimination, and progress toward full compliance.

Who was involved?

This transformation required full collaboration across government. Key contributors included: DTMB’s Digital Accessibility Testing Team, IT agency support teams, Central Procurement, the Attorney General’s Office, accessibility subject matter experts, developers, content specialists, and executive sponsors.

Three enterprise roles were essential:

- Single Points of Contact (SPOCs): Responsible for identifying in-scope systems, submitting accessibility review requests, validating status changes, tracking remediation progress, coordinating with the Digital Accessibility Testing Team, and escalating risks when needed.
- Digital Accessibility Agency Liaisons (DAALs): Embedded in departments to coordinate remediation, support teams, ensure alignment with enterprise standards, and bring agency-specific context to statewide decisions.
- DTMB Digital Accessibility Testing Team (DATT): Having a highly trained specialist review team and an independently structured separation of duties within the DTMB Digital Accessibility Testing Team was a critical factor in producing unbiased accessibility results.

MCDR expanded statewide accessibility training, supporting thousands of employees through courses on inclusive design, accessible content creation, assistive technology, and ADA Title II requirements.

How did you do it?

The initiative was supported by \$3 million in enterprise funding, automated and manual testing tools, Power BI dashboards, and a coordinated



A screenshot of an article announcing MCDR's expanded accessibility trainings.

project management approach that emphasized transparency and consistency.

A strong communications and change-management program ensured buy-in, including leadership briefings, enterprise memos, documentation for SPOC and DAAL roles, solution-specific FAQ sheets, and recurring cross-functional meetings to align expectations within and beyond the centralized IT department. Weekly SPOC meetings reinforced remediation expectations, provided updates, and resolved WCAG applicability questions. The initiation of reoccurring monthly DAAL meetings strengthened cross-agency knowledge-sharing, increased consistency in interpreting WCAG requirements, and supported teams as they remediated complex digital content. Additionally, a dedicated Microsoft Teams space was established to support ongoing, enterprise-wide collaboration – enabling agencies to share resources, ask questions, and align on accessibility best practices in real time.

To maintain alignment and ensure sustained executive sponsorship, DTMB prioritized consistent communication with IT and agency leadership throughout the initiative. Regularly scheduled touchpoints – including Agency IT Liaisons meetings, Customer Service Partnership discussions, and IT leadership briefings – kept stakeholders informed of progress, risks, and upcoming decisions. These sessions reinforced the shared understanding that this accessibility modernization effort was the number-one priority within the enterprise IT portfolio; allowing leaders to provide timely guidance, remove barriers, and champion the cross-agency collaboration required for success.

The combination of centralized expertise and decentralized implementation, supported by a continuous training program, ensured the roadmap could be executed at scale and speed.

IMPACT

What did the project make better?

Michigan's transformation has driven measurable improvements in digital equity, service quality, and organizational readiness.

Before:

- Roughly half of all external-facing applications in the enterprise portfolio had been reviewed for accessibility.
- Accessibility expertise and accountability varied widely across agencies.
- Many legacy systems were difficult to update or assess due to technical age and complexity of functionality.
- The extensive backlog and inconsistent enterprise standards slowed progress toward compliance.

After:

- 500+ systems have completed accessibility reviews.
- A statewide remediation pipeline and dashboard now deliver transparency for all stakeholders.
- SPOCs provide consistent tracking and accountability for remediation and executive updates, ensuring all systems are tracked for compliance.
- DALs ensure alignment within agencies and accelerate issue resolution.
- Statewide training has significantly improved accessibility awareness and skills.
- The state has minimized potential enforcement and legal exposure.

Residents now experience more consistent, usable, and equitable digital services, particularly those who rely on assistive technology or alternative input devices.

How do you know?

Progress is monitored through enterprise dashboards tracking reviews, remediation cycles, and compliance milestones. System owners and SPOCs provide validated updates that enable accurate statewide reporting. Declines in accessibility complaints and more effective agency-led remediation efforts further demonstrate improvement.

“As a native keyboard/screen reader user, I have been able to directly contribute to the success of this effort by performing assessments using an immersive testing approach, which in turn, has enhanced the skills and experiences of our other team members. This continues to provide important context for helping bridge the gap between achieving WCAG 2.1 AA compliance and realizing accessible, robust web applications that can truly serve the needs of a diverse set of users.” -Christopher Knapp, DATT Tester

“The State of Michigan is committed to providing accessible solutions for our communities. As part of that effort, the collaboration between Treasury and Agency Services, we have worked to ensure our applications are compliant to WCAG 2.1 standards while also delivering the user, customer, and owner experience that we pride ourselves on. With a robust framework of process, starting with the tracking & submission of our solutions, the data driven reports for compliance items, the focused effort of our IT teams, our vendors & our business, we have successfully moved our systems forward to meet the standard. We remain focused on resolving remaining items to ensure that we not only meet the mandate but more importantly provide our state, all of it, with the same level of service in our systems regardless of disability.” – Colleen Ewald, DTMB SPOC for Treasury

What now?

Michigan has institutionalized accessibility across design, development, procurement, and maintenance. The state is standing up a permanent rated service for ongoing accessibility testing and review, ensuring continuous monitoring.

Long-term sustainability will be achieved through:

- Ongoing MDCR training, including role specific learning paths.
- Continuous tracking through the enterprise dashboard.
- Integration of WCAG 2.2 and future accessibility standards.
- Ongoing SPOC and DAAL engagement for governance and operations.
- Expansion of accessibility considerations in vendor management and procurement.
- Incorporation of accessible development practices into statewide System Application Development Lifecycle documentation and processes to shift left, proactively building accessible applications from the start.



This initiative is not a one-time remediation project, it is a durable transformation of how Michigan designs, maintains, and evolves its digital services. It ensures equitable access for residents today and builds a foundation for accessibility for decades to come.