



COLORADO

Governor's Office of Information Technology

When you know better, do better: How Colorado's Technology Accessibility Program is improving access to government services

State:

Colorado

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Governor's Office of Information Technology

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Technology Accessibility Program: Improving Access to State Services

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Government services should be easily accessible to all, regardless of ability. While much attention has been paid to physical access (e.g., curb effect), the same has not always been true for digital accessibility. With legacy websites and applications the "norm," people with disabilities can find it difficult to access critical state services.

One in five Coloradans, or about 860,000 adults, have a disability. The passage of [HB21-1110 Colorado Laws for Persons with Disabilities](#) (codified in C.R.S.24-85-103 et seq.) tasked the Governor's Office of Information Technology (OIT) with establishing technology accessibility standards and leading state agencies in creating accessibility improvement plans no later than June 30, 2022.

To meet this mandate, OIT created the Technology Accessibility Program (TAP). The initial team of two worked agilely to determine needs across the agencies and develop the IT Accessibility Adoption Plan, which includes the framework and processes agencies would follow to obtain a solid understanding of the problem at hand and the steps needed to remove barriers. TAP provides technical support to agencies and is a go-to resource for municipalities working on accessibility. The program maintains a website with robust resources, provides coaching and training opportunities, publishes a monthly newsletter, and is growing a community of practice. Most recently, TAP worked to implement Aira, a service providing on-demand, visual interpretation services for people who are blind or have low vision navigating state-owned buildings, websites, and web applications. This [compelling \(and short\) video](#) shows it led a blind state employee to the Lt. Governor's Office.

Making government services accessible is the right thing to do but can be difficult to do correctly. TAP is making this happen in Colorado!



“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”
Maya Angelou

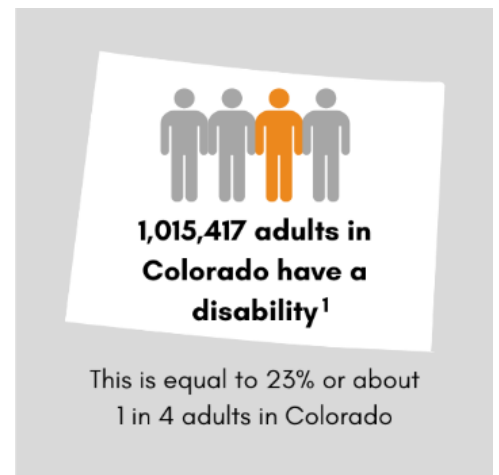
These words resonate with the digital accessibility journey Colorado state agencies have been on through the guidance and leadership of the Technology Accessibility Program (TAP).

About one in four adults in Colorado have a disability, which accounts for more than one million adults who may not be able to access or have a harder time accessing state services that are not accessible. With the passage of [HB21-1110 Colorado Laws for Persons with Disabilities](#) and increased funding, the state is taking significant steps forward to improve access to the state’s digital products. Ensuring our digital products are accessible to users with sensory, cognitive, and mobility disabilities, ultimately improves the experience for all users, regardless of ability.

To meet this mandate, in the fall of 2021, OIT officially launched the TAP. Up until that time, OIT’s Theresa Montano, Senior Solutions Architect, was a one-woman shop working to improve the accessibility of our digital products. While Theresa did a great job, spoiler alert, it takes more than one person to tackle the dynamic and vast array of needs around technology accessibility for the state. The legislation included funding to hire a Solutions Engineer and purchase a statewide license for Siteimprove—an automated website testing service.

Understanding the large task at hand, the now two-person TAP team quickly started the critical work to assess the current state, determine needs across the agencies and create the [IT Accessibility Adoption Plan template](#) to be used by all agencies in creating their own IT Accessibility Adoption Plans. The template enabled agencies to “know better” as it required them to use an accessibility maturity model with core criteria to assess where they were; The maturity levels (launch, integrate, optimize) helped illuminate the extent to which the agency has implemented accessibility best practices. The intention was to provide a flexible tool for agencies to integrate accessibility holistically throughout their culture and processes. The framework also allows reporting, measuring and tracking the progress and growth of each agency.

Through 2021 and 2022, agencies completed their IT Accessibility Adoption Plans, which were critical first steps in understanding the size of the state’s overall accessibility problem. It was not a large surprise to learn we had a considerable amount of work ahead. We used information from the agency



Source: Centers for Disease Control & Prevention
<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/impacts/colorado.html>

IT Accessibility Adoption Plans to put together a first-of-its-kind joint budget request that was supported, and funding starts July 1, 2023. While this funding isn't enough to address all of the technology accessibility gaps, it is the largest investment in technology accessibility the state has ever made and will provide state agencies funding to further advance the implementation of their plans, which includes collectively testing and remediating over 1,000 applications and over 400 websites.

IMPACT

Due to the success of the original two-person team, in 2022, the state invested additional funding to expand the TAP by an additional five employees (a senior manager and four accessibility consultants) and to provide accessibility-related software, services and training to state agencies. At OIT, the TAP is ensuring our digital products and services are accessible to users with sensory, cognitive and mobility disabilities and ultimately improving the experience for all users, regardless of ability. For state agencies, the TAP leads the coordination of technology accessibility efforts and provides support and technical assistance to all agencies, offering software, training and consultation on the best solutions. The TAP has risen to the challenge HB21-1110 set forth by:

- Assigning Accessibility Consultants to each agency in order to provide technical assistance, communication and support with accessibility efforts.
- Hosting weekly Open Office Hours focused on accessibility that serves as a community of practice across state agencies and OIT to share best practices, problem solve together and track progress. This meeting is attended by 50-100 people each week and has been an invaluable place for agencies to come together to share, collaborate, commiserate and learn.
- Procuring a statewide, unlimited license to Siteimprove to scan websites and provide reports on compliance with accessibility standards (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines). The Siteimprove scores are used across agencies to identify websites and pages that need to be remediated, provide training and support on accessible practices and design principles, and continually scan sites to provide information back to agencies on their websites as new content is added (often frequently).
- Providing software, training and tools for making accessible documents and PDFs.
- Publishing a monthly newsletter and providing resources and training to state employees on various accessibility-related topics.
- Creating a pool of vendors that can provide manual accessibility testing, which is needed for all websites and applications.
- Working to integrate accessibility requirements and processes into the project development lifecycle, software development life cycle and procurement processes.

Every Coloradan should have equal access to state services. As part of a broader effort to create a Colorado for all, TAP embarked on an initiative to implement Aira, a visual interpreting service that provides live, on-demand access to visual information through human-to-human professional assistance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. [Launched in March 2023](#), Aira enhances



independence for Coloradans who are blind or have low vision by delivering on-demand, professionally-trained and objective visual interpreting for just about any task. Coloradans are able to get assistance navigating state-operated locations, state websites, and state web applications; and interpreting otherwise inaccessible state documentation through free calls with Aira agents for up to 30 minutes per session. Through the Aira app, your smartphone camera streams secure, live video to a professionally trained agent who visually interprets what is shared, from describing and reading to explaining and navigating, just about anything safely and securely. Aira can be used to navigate physical spaces like a state building, campus or state park in addition to navigating state websites (colorado.gov or state.co.us). As the state works on making all of our services accessible, Aira is one of the accommodation tools TAP is providing as a way to ensure better access to services today. This short video best highlights Aira's benefits:

[▶ Blind and Low-Vision Coloradans Can Access State Services Through Aira .](#)

The Technology Accessibility Program is no longer a concept but is fully operational. The TAP received grant funding to implement an Empathy Lab that is a virtual inclusion and awareness lab designed to build awareness, empathy and desire to create accessible and equitable digital products. The Empathy Lab will focus on building capability across the state by allowing teams involved in developing digital products to experience how their work impacts Colorado's diverse communities and increase their awareness of accessibility and equitable design principles. A community advisory board is also being created that will be used to create a direct feedback loop to the state from Coloradans experiencing barriers to technology, including those with a disability, those identifying as low income, people of color, rural residents, etc. The Empathy Lab and input from the Community Advisory Board will both help inform the TAP's program and training strategy.

In 2023, the next steps for the program will be to create statewide rules that augment and support the state's legislation and provide clarity on matters such as accommodations, exceptions and prioritization of work. As agencies all work to implement their IT Accessibility Adoption Plans, we will continue to collectively learn together and adapt as needed. Progress on the accessibility efforts will be tracked on a public dashboard, discussed within teams and agencies, and discussed with state representatives who are part of the Joint Budget Committee and Joint Technology Committee.

The TAP was created within OIT to help agencies comply with HB21-1110, but at the heart of this matter is creating a Colorado for all. The TAP continues to have a herculean task ahead as the state works to fix accessibility issues we created in the past, but at this point has managed to create an exceptional program in a short amount of time that is seen as an invaluable resource for the state. We have created a framework and process for agencies to create IT Accessibility Adoption Plans, successfully coordinated a statewide budget request, continue to provide technical support to agencies, and are a go-to resource for municipalities working on accessibility. The program provides a website with resources, a monthly newsletter, weekly office hours, and regular accessibility consulting for state agencies, and has a growing community of practice. Having accessible government services is the right thing to do, but can be difficult to do correctly. TAP is making this happen in Colorado!

