The Office of Accessibility and Accommodations Section 508 Team
Advancing an inclusive Department through accessible content
By Jean-Pierre Monacelli

The World Bank estimates that approximately 1 billion people around the globe live with a disability, making up the world's largest minority. In the United States, one in four adults lives with a disability. The Bureau of Global Talent Management's Office of Accessibility and Accommodations (OAA) works to ensure that Americans with disabilities have an equal opportunity to contribute to the Department of State's mission.

"We cannot do our job of advancing America's interests, values, and commitment to democracy without a State Department that is truly representative of the American people," Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated in remarks to Department employees, January 27. OAA supports this goal by helping to recruit and retain a workforce that truly reflects America.

OAA's Section 508 team, named after [Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended](), serves as a central resource, providing training and ensuring that the Department provides products accessible to all in adherence with the law.

"The Section 508 team supports the accessibility of all digital information to the entire State Department," said OAA Director Jameela Raja Akbari. "They are an integral part of advancing OAA's mission to create a barrier-free environment."

Established in 2016, OAA develops disability policies, supports Department programs, and provides services to individuals with disabilities as required by the [Rehabilitation Act of 1973]() and the [Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)](). The Department has expanded the capacity of its Section 508 team in response to increased demand. In fiscal year (FY) 2019, the team received 42 requests to review web pages or applications and 393 requests to help make accessible documents. In the first half of FY2020, those numbers have more than doubled. In 2019, the Section 508 team consisted of just one team member. Now, the team includes seven employees and can better support the increased accessibility needs of the Department.

The team focuses on access to internal digital information. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was the first federal law prohibiting discrimination against individuals with

disabilities and formed the foundation for later disability nondiscrimination laws, including the ADA. Added to the Rehabilitation Act in 1998, Section 508 requires that all federal agencies provide information and communications technology (ICT) "developed, procured, maintained, or used" is accessible to individuals with disabilities. ICT encompasses any and all digital communications—including websites, computer software, web and mobile apps— and all electronic documents, such as digital forms and portable document format (PDF) files. Accessible ICT is sometimes referred to as being "508 compliant."

The Section 508 team concentrates on several key areas to support Department employees' equal access to content, websites, and applications and ensures that any public-facing content is also accessible. The team ensures accessibility of PDFs, presentation slides, word processing files, and spreadsheets. They also collaborate with various information technology personnel and offices at the Department to securely deploy new, innovative tools and assistive technologies on Department networks. Additionally, the Section 508 team conducts customized training on making websites, electronic documents, and other ICT accessible—at no cost to the requester. With a renewed focus on outreach, the team answers questions, promotes best practices, and helps build accessibility from the beginning rather than as an afterthought.

The team remains up-to-date on the latest Section 508 mandates to update the Department's Section 508 policies and procedures accordingly. The team also ensures the Department's transparency by producing semi-annual legal compliance reports. The benefits of the Section 508 team's work making websites, software, and electronic documents accessible extends well beyond users with disabilities. All Department employees reap the benefits of accessibility.

"The Section 508 team ensures publications designed by Global Publishing Solutions adhere to the accessibility standards set forth by Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. Their services and support, no matter how complex, have been instrumental to our publications being compliant," states Chief of Graphics Lamya El-Shacke of Global Publishing Services in the Bureau of Administration.

Most people create, edit, and read electronic documents daily, perhaps without considering their accessibility. These documents include Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Excel formats and PDF formats. While OAA's Section 508 team is available to help ensure the accessibility of documents, there are some easy "Do It Yourself" steps everyone can take. To

start, Department employees can use the Accessibility Checker feature within an application to determine a document's accessibility. In Word documents, the Accessibility Checker is in the "Review" tab; in Excel and PowerPoint, it is within the "Tools" tab. The Accessibility Checker will highlight and provide solutions to any content that is not accessible. It is crucial to provide descriptions for each image to make images or logos within a document accessible. This alternative text, or "alt text," provides equal access by presenting users of accessible technology, such as screen readers, with an accurate and equivalent description of the image. Certain fonts and colors will yield more accessible documents. The most common accessible fonts are sans serif, such as Calibri, Arial, and Tahoma. In addition, color combinations should provide a sufficient degree of contrast, such as black text against a white background or white text against a navy background. Because large blocks of undifferentiated text do not work well with screen readers, using headings and subheadings, bullet points, and numbered lists also help to make the document accessible. The Section 508 team is available to provide training and share best practices on this topic.

The Section 508 team can also help offices incorporate accessibility at the start of their website or system development or redesign processes. The Bureau of Medical Services (MED) engaged the Section 508 team early in its Electronic Health Record (EHR) implementation process to ensure that project planning included a roadmap to achieving full accessibility compliance for the system.

"The Section 508 team went above the call of duty to assist MED's EHR implementation team in implementing products for Health Units and Department employees in domestic MED locations and more than 200 U.S. diplomatic missions in 170 countries," said MED's Medical Informatics Office Director Ermie D. Herring. "The readiness of the Section 508 team to expend resources on behalf of accessibility topics outside of their regularly defined duties will significantly contribute to the successful rollout of the EHR system in 2022."

Incorporating accessibility at the start of a website or system development project is easier and less expensive than reworking an existing site. According to a 2020 report by the Project Management Institute's Pulse of the Profession, an average 11.4 percent of investment is wasted due to poor project performance. Strategic planning—including considering accessibility at the front-end of any website development or redesign process—is key to cost effectiveness. For assistance with any new or existing website upgrades or modernization

efforts, reach out to the Section 508 team during the planning and design phase. Institutionalizing such best practices—a key goal of the 508 team—will enable the Department to achieve its accessibility goals.

Creating a truly accessible Department—one where all employees and its public audience have equal access to digital information and digital platforms—is a transformational effort. By joining the Section 508 team effort, the workforce can ensure its websites, applications, and electronic documents are accessible to all. For assistance or information, email Section 508 team.

Jean-Pierre Monacelli serves as project manager for the Section 508 team in the Office of Accessibility and Accommodations.

Department leadership tour the Access Center

"Our diverse team enables us to better fulfill our mission at the Department," said Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources Brian McKeon before he toured the Access Center, May 21. "This requires ensuring that the most valuable tool our nation has—our people—have an equitable opportunity to contribute to their full potential."

The Access Center is a 2,400-square-foot space that allows Department of State employees to test, train, and provide feedback on technology-based reasonable accommodations in a setting similar to their domestic or overseas workspace.

Just days into her new job as the Department's first Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, Ambassador Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley toured the Access Center, April 23.

"The State Department is committed to building an agile, inclusive workforce that reflects America's diversity and capitalizes on the talents of all segments of the population," said Abercrombie-Winstanley.

The center can host training sessions that feature best practices pertaining to OAA's Section 508 team and award-winning Video Captioning Team. OAA accessibility efforts reinforce the broader Department diversity and inclusion efforts. To make an appointment to visit the Access Center, please contact OAA.