

## Give Visually Impaired Better Internet Access

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It is ironic that in an age when technology could erase many barriers for the blind and visually impaired, private and public entities are not paying enough attention to accessibility of their online services. In addition to preventing access to highly receptive consumers — more than seven million blind and visually impaired persons in the U.S. alone — such organizations unknowingly may not be in compliance with federal statutes.

Federal standards on access to electronic and information technology (Section 508, Americans With Disabilities Act) require keyboard-enabled interfaces. In addition, all graphic elements on Web pages must have a textual description and online forms must be accessible.



**Screen-reading software and Braille output devices can help the visually impaired use computers if websites are properly coded.**

Blind and visually impaired internet users rely on a variety of assistive technologies, including screen-enhancement software, braille output devices and screen-reading software, to access digital content. Many of today's websites are improperly coded to accommodate these specialized tools thereby rendering their digital content inaccessible. For example, website logos that do not have a text label. When screen-reading software encounters an unidentified logo, it will only say the word "graphic." If every component of a website has a text element, screen-reading software such as JAWS (Job Access With Speech) would be able to read all of the information on the page.

We are living in a world that has embraced digital technology, and the blind and visually impaired have the right to participate fully. People sometimes assume that technology erases barriers for the visually impaired. We hear all the time how anyone with internet access can find out practically anything. The intricacies of digital forms and web page interfaces may not seem formidable at first glance, but these barriers are just as real as any physical barrier. It is not an impossible or even a difficult task to make sure websites are accessible.

It is perplexing that private and public entities spend significant amounts of money on driving business to their websites but fail to consider accessibility for the visually impaired. It is especially perplexing when you consider that the software to solve accessibility issues already exists, and federal regulations are in place that require access to online information.

We know that online access for the blind and visually impaired is possible because we provide it at Miami Lighthouse. Our vision rehabilitation program has an extensive assistive technology component. It is vital for our program participants to know they can regain the ability to use computers, iPhones, and other electronic devices for work, education, socializing — everything for which the sighted world uses technology.

Miami Lighthouse provides auditing services of private and public websites offering a full examination of coding and design, audits accessibility of website content, and tests for usability within that ensure accessibility of information on the monitor with keystroke commands utilizing screen-reading software. Past customers of Miami Lighthouse's Website Accessibility Compliance services include a variety of public and private sectors, such as city and county governments, educational and medical institutions, airlines and nonprofits.

Miami Lighthouse consultants reviewed their websites to ensure industry best practices complying with Section 508 of the ADA law and the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), to ensure legal compliance. The implementation of our audit report findings demonstrates pro-active, civic-minded commitment to inclusion of all internet users. Accessibility benefits everyone in the long run.



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