

Access Ready Healthcare

When the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) information and communications technology (ICT) driven healthcare did not exist as we know it today. Today, the Internet and ICT play a critical role in the healthcare of Americans. Increasingly, public and private healthcare entities are providing goods and services to the public through websites, apps, telemedicine, electronic health records, patient engagement tools, health monitoring tools, virtual reality, online claims submissions and data analysis, artificial intelligence, and internet-of-things technology. In addition, healthcare providers are using IT internally to improve their own productivity and performance.

Access Ready INC. is an independent, non-profit, cross-disability education and advocacy organization promoting a policy of inclusion and accessibility of information and

communications technology (ICT). Access Ready's strategies include technical findings, policy discussions, best practices, and advocacy efforts made available to the public through www.accessready.org, its social media stream, and other public relations efforts.

Access Ready asks the question, "If physical facilities in this country must be built in accordance with accessibility standards, why not information and communications technology?" Businesses, employers, and federal, state, and local governments are becoming increasingly dependent on information and communications technology to provide goods and services. For people with disabilities, accessible information and communications technology is a necessity, not a luxury or a convenience, which fosters independence, economic self-sufficiency, and active, meaningful participation in civic life.

What is an Access Ready Environment?

An access Ready Environment is where access for people with disabilities at the physical and technological levels is a matter of forethought, design, inclusion and planning instead of a condition of afterthought, delay and discrimination resulting in risk to all concerned.

Public Access

Many healthcare technologies provide healthcare information to patients and the public. However, despite the requirements of the ADA, many of them are difficult or impossible for individuals with disabilities to use due to barriers raised by inaccessibility. An Access Ready policy is intended to advance accessibility of the ICT used by the healthcare industry.

Being unable to access healthcare websites and other ICT puts individuals with disabilities, as well as their health care providers, at a great disadvantage. Today's healthcare system is

developing into a dynamic ICT-driven marketplace which provides unprecedented access to the latest medical information. These ICT-based tools provide patients and their doctors with greater information, more choices, and increased flexibility to make healthcare decisions. Everyone has a right and a responsibility to participate actively in their health by taking advantage of the information and tools available. People with disabilities have these same rights and responsibilities and should not be prevented from participating actively in their own care by technology accessibility barriers. Access Ready ICT can help.

The recent COVID pandemic brought this home to millions in very stark ways. When we were all told to go home to live, work, learn, teach, shop and access healthcare many people with disabilities found the inaccessibility of websites and other ICT based services severely limited

their abilities to participate in their own healthcare.

There is a myriad of websites that provide information about causes, risk factors, complications, test and diagnosis, treatment and drugs, prevention, and alternative therapies for just about any disease or illness. Moreover, healthcare and insurance providers are increasingly offering patients the ability to access their healthcare records and submit requests, forms, and claims electronically via websites and to schedule appointments, review test results, and interact with their physicians online. It is now difficult to imagine a world without the unprecedented access to information that the web provides. By adopting an Access Ready policy, healthcare providers can achieve and maintain access for patients with disabilities.

An Access Ready policy ensures accessibility is built in from the outset - when it is easiest, least expensive, and most effective. In addition, an

Access Ready policy provides a strategic approach to incorporating accessibility in to existing technology over time. Embracing an Access Ready policy can accomplish this over reasonable budget cycles without real difficulty.

Finally, because becoming accessible is only the beginning - without policies in place to maintain it, the effort is wasted - an Access Ready policy helps ensure accessibility barriers will not reemerge over time.

As using ICT to access healthcare increases, the inability of individuals with disabilities to have access can have a significant adverse effect on their health. For healthcare to ignore people with disabilities who represent twenty-five percent of the population is unconscionable. If the healthcare industry adopted an Access Ready policy, they would be able to better serve this group that is perhaps even more dependent on health care than the average person.

Internal Access

Information and communications technology is not only dramatically changing the way healthcare providers serve the public. It is also changing how healthcare workers do their jobs. As an industry, the healthcare profession presents many opportunities for employment at all skill levels. To open up such opportunities to all qualified healthcare workers, it is vital that the employee-facing information technologies be accessible to people with a range of abilities. The availability of online services not only makes life easier for patients, but also enables healthcare as an industry to operate more efficiently and cost-effectively. Using these technologies can expand the pool of qualified and capable employees to which providers have access, but only if those technologies are accessible.

Again, the COVID pandemic has pushed forward the need for employees who can and want to work from home. This is a perfect scenario for

workers with disabilities in this employee deprived recruitment environment.

An Access Ready policy's ability to make sure both the front and back ends of the technology are accessible moves healthcare in a mutually advantageous direction.

The promise of the ADA to provide an equal opportunity for protected individuals to participate in and benefit from all aspects of the American health care system and all aspects of this growing job market will be achieved in today's technologically advanced society only if it is clear to healthcare institutions that their information and communications technologies must be accessible.

Douglas George Towne
Chairman,
Disability Relations Group