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TECHNOLOGY

DOJ fails to report on making federal websites accessible to disabled people

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A sign marks the facade of the Robert F. Kennedy Department of Justice Building in Washington, D.C. on May 5. A group of senators are asking the DOJ why the agency has failed to file reports on the federal government's compliance with website accessibility standards.

Patrick Semansky/AP

About a quarter of Americans live with a disability, but nearly a third of the most popular federal websites are difficult for disabled people to access.

It has been 10 years since the Department of Justice filed a biennial report on the federal government's compliance with accessibility standards for information technology, a bipartisan group of concerned senators say. The reports are required by Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

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On Thursday, a group of seven senators sent a letter to the department asking for the DOJ to once again issue these reports, and the lawmakers want to know why the agency hasn't filed them. The letter not only has bipartisan support, but also the support of chairs and ranking members of three Senate committees.

"To have no reporting in a decade is just ... unacceptable," said one of the senators, Bob Casey, D-Pa., told NPR.
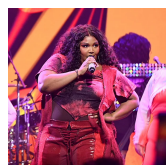
"It's critical because of the barriers that people with disabilities face all the time, when it comes to the full access that they should to have the resources of the federal government, and the resources, especially that are provided online," he said.

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Under Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, the federal government is required to make all of its websites accessible to disabled people, and to publicly report on its compliance with accessibility standards every two years.

The Justice Department did not immediately respond to NPR's request for comment about the senators' letter.

"Website accessibility means that a website has been designed with the needs of people with disabilities in mind so anyone can navigate that website," says Ashley Johnson, who is the senior policy analyst at the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation. This can include making sure the websites can work well with assistive technology devices such as screen readers that read aloud content, and screen magnifiers that enlarge content.

CULTURE

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Without regular reports, "Congress, taxpayers and agencies themselves lack a crucial source of feedback for identifying and resolving longstanding accessibility issues," the senators wrote.

Casey told NPR that reporting is critical — "not just for the executive branch and the legislative branch to have this information, but to get the information out publicly so that not only people with disabilities, but all Americans know what is happening in these agencies as it relates to accessibility."

DOJ previously reported mixed success in federal website accessibility

The latest DOJ report, from 2012, had "identified substantial gaps in Section 508 compliance across the federal government and included recommendations for agencies to meet their accessibility requirement," the senators wrote. For example, the DOJ reported a "mixed levels of success" in implementing Section 508, and

recommended that agencies increase training, appoint 508 coordinators, and establish 508 offices or programs.

It is unclear why the DOJ stopped issuing these biennial reports, as well as whether it collected Section 508 compliance data or issued recommendations more recently than 2012. Questions remain on whether the DOJ has the resources and personnel necessary to comply with the law and issue these reports, and what its plans are to begin meeting the reporting requirement. The senators said they want answers regarding the situation by July 29.

Why is accessibility important?

Within the U.S., 26% of Americans live with a disability. Yet, a 2021 report by the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation found that 30% of the most popular federal websites did not pass an automated accessibility test for their homepage and 48% of those sites failed the test on at least one of their three most popular pages.

"Without accessible websites and other information technology, people with disabilities aren't treated equally under the law," Casey said.

NATIONAL

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Johnson, of the foundation, said that the fact that the DOJ hasn't reported on the federal government's compliance over the last decade speaks to a larger issue of disabled people not being prioritized by society at large.

"We're all so used to having information at our fingertips, literally on our phones. But if you have a disability, and you can't get that information from the agencies," Casey said.

"It just flies in the face of not just transparency, but what our society has come to

expect in terms of the ability for people to access information," he added. "So we look forward to [the DOJ's] answers and those answers will help us get a better sense of what's happening and what next steps have to be taken."

accessibility

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