According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 56.7 million people — nearly one in five Americans — have a disability, such as vision loss, hearing loss or mobility impairments. People with disabilities face many challenges when websites are not accessible. For example, individuals who are blind may not be able to navigate a website using a screen reader if the website does not properly label graphics, and individuals who are deaf are not able to understand the narration in an online video if it is not properly captioned. When government agencies fail to make their websites accessible, people with disabilities are unable to get access to important government services and information. Unfortunately, according to a recent study by the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation (ITIF), many state government websites are not accessible.

The ITIF study reviewed 400 state government websites — eight sites from each of the 50 states. The websites were chosen to reflect some of the most popular online government services, such as finding election information, obtaining a driver’s license and paying taxes. To test a site’s accessibility, ITIF assessed its compliance with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0, a widely used set of accessibility guidelines for websites that is produced by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), an
international standards organization for the Internet. WCAG 2.0 was created in 2008, so website operators have had almost a decade to adopt.

Overall, ITIF found that while 12 percent of state government websites received a perfect score, 41 percent failed the accessibility test, meaning that these sites had a substantial number of known problems that might prevent someone with a disability from using the site. Unfortunately, many of the states with the highest percentage of residents with disabilities performed poorly on the accessibility test. For example, West Virginia has the highest percentage of people with disabilities of any state yet ranked 46th for its average accessibility score. And none of the 10 states with the highest percentage of people with disabilities ranked in the top 10 in the accessibility rankings. States should require that all government websites adhere to the latest WCAG standard.

Accessibility testing is always tricky because automated tests can only tell part of the story. For example, an automated tool can verify that an image on a website is labeled, but it cannot verify that the label is correct or particularly helpful. Some of the states that performed the best on accessibility engaged directly with people with disabilities to test and provide feedback on their websites. For example, Massachusetts partnered with the Perkins School for the Blind, the oldest such school in the United States, to test the accessibility of its websites. Similarly, Georgia partnered with an accessibility lab at Georgia Tech to review some of its sites. Given that every state has a local population of users with disabilities that can provide this type of feedback, more states should adopt this practice.

Just as some government agencies have begun to embrace a “mobile-first” strategy — where they design their websites for mobile devices, rather than designing for desktop and treating mobile as an afterthought — states should start adhering to an “accessibility first” strategy — where they design their websites to be accessible for people with disabilities from the outset, rather than treating accessibility as an add-on. The benefit of this approach is that websites designed for people with disabilities can be better for everyone — just like mobile-friendly sites work well for desktop users. For example, websites with proper contrast between text and background images are easier to read for everyone.

By embracing accessible design for websites, states can be more inclusive and ensure that e-government services are available to all.