

STATE OF RHODE ISLAND



Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities & Hospitals
DIVISION OF DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES
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January 25, 2024

The Honorable Jacquelyn M. Baginski, Chair
House Committee on Innovation, Internet and Technology
State House
Providence, RI 02903

RE: 2024—H 7159 An Act Relating to State Affairs and Government – Departments of State Government

Dear Chair Baginski:

I write in support of **H 7159** which requires State websites to comply with WCAG 2.2 standards by July 1, 2026.

At the Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals (BHDDH), we recognize that individuals deserve equitable access to government programming and information regardless of their race, color, national origin, disability, age, and gender. Over the years, how we access information has changed. We, therefore, recognize that we need to support changes to how we define access and the need to achieve equitable access to information.

An essential component to ensuring equitable access to information is effective communication. This includes the availability of online written and oral communication materials. As part of ongoing efforts to enhance equity and accessibility of new and existing initiatives, the Rhode Island Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) supports House Bill 7159, which stipulates all State websites come into compliance with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2.

Ensuring access to timely and accurate online information is of growing significance. As internet use across the nation and state continue to increase, it is vital to ensure web content is meaningfully accessible to all members of the community, including individuals with disabilities. When content is not designed accessibly or made available to all members in the same way, we are excluding certain individuals from accessing information prevent them from access information available to the rest of the population. To put this into perspective, ACS 1-year estimates (2022) report 13.2% of Rhode Islanders have a disability, of which 5.8% have a mobile disability, 5.3% have a cognitive disability, 3.2% have an auditory disability, and 2.3% have a visual disability. Considering the services provided by State agencies like BHDDH, the need for accessible communications is even greater. As the only state agency that regulates the services and supports for adults with developmental disabilities, DDD has a responsibility to provide accessible information to participants and provider agencies, which includes accessible web content.

DDD is committed to building accessible web-based content and has already begun to make changes to our website to ensure WCAG 2.2. compliance, including:

- Actively collaborating with various members of the State's Division of Information Technology to conduct content audits and review site analytics.
- Staff attending the Digital Services Academy provided by the State's Division of Information Technology, which includes topics such as inclusive design and digital equity, understanding web accessibility and compliance, and creating accessible documents.
- Continuously surveying our community on the usability and understandability of site content.
- Improving content navigation for screen read users including, but not limited to, the use of headings and labels, descriptive hyperlinks, and text alternatives.
- Streamlining the publication of web content so it aligns with accessibility standards and is available in multiple formats, such as video accompaniments with captioning.
- Planning a digital literacy campaign for the community to support meaningful access to web content that will include routine accessibility tips and website tutorials.

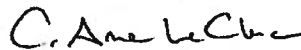
Over the next calendar year DDD aims to continue enhancing our website. Our primary objective is to ensure content intended for participants and families is easy to navigate and adheres to the Plain Writing Act (Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Administration, 2010). The passage of House Bill 7159 will support these efforts and ensure we meet full compliance with WCAG 2.2.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this legislation.

Sincerely,



Kevin W. Savage
Director
Division of Developmental Disabilities
BHDDH



Anne LeClerc
Associate Director
Division of Developmental Disabilities
BHDDH

cc: The Honorable Members of the House Committee on Innovation, Internet and Technology
The Honorable Camille F.J. Vella Wilkinson
Nicole McCarty, Esquire, Chief Legal Counsel to the Speaker of the House
Lynne Urbani, Director of House Policy