How One Life-Changing Moment Made Digital Accessibility My Inspired Mission

By: Kim Greenfield Alfonso

My foray into the disability field began 22 years ago when my daughter was born. She was born with Peters Anomaly, which resulted in her having limited vision and being a braille reader and cane traveler. Like many parents who have a child with a disability, I immersed myself in learning as much as possible to become the best advocate for my child.

Kim Greenfield Alfonso, co-founder and Chief Executive Officer of

So, for the past 20 years, I have worked in the blindness arena on boards and parent organizations (Montgomery County Commission for People with Disabilities, Maryland School for the Blind, the D.C. Advisory Board for Special Education, and others), and I spent 12 years as Chief Operating Officer at the Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind.

My heart was pounding one evening, and I was unsuccessful in fighting back the tears as I watched my daughter trying so hard independently to work on a research project. She struggled to navigate a website that was not accessible, and a research project that should have taken anyone else just one hour took her three hours. She had to finally ask for my assistance.

So, this topic of accessibility is personal to me as I have watched my daughter through the years struggle with online accessibility issues (during school and college), applying for scholarships and internships, accessing school materials, and most recently, trying to access a list of COVID testing sites online that was inaccessible to her. No one is surprised that my mission is to create an accessible and inclusive world where everyone is All In!

Think about what it's like for a person with a disability to use your website

Are you excluding a group of people from accessing your services? Imagine if:

- Some of your clients can't find out about or register for your programs,
- Some of your donors can't successfully sign up for a recurring online donation,
- Some potential volunteers are shut out of your opportunities,
- Terrific prospective employees can't complete job applications, or
- Your staff or board members have trouble accessing materials for meetings.

In essence, part of the world is completely closed to them. This means that you may have closed the doors to [61 million people living with a disability](#) in the U.S. That is over 26 percent of our population and the largest minority. Also, many people with a disability do not identify or disclose that they have a disability. And, with the advent of COVID, we will continue to see an increase in people with disabilities. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, "Being unable to access websites puts individuals

with disabilities at a great disadvantage in today's society."

Inaccessible websites create barriers for people with disabilities, just as poorly designed doorways prevent some people with disabilities from entering. Inaccessible web content means that people with disabilities are denied equal access to information. An inaccessible website can exclude people just as much as steps or other barriers that prevent entry to a physical location.

Why digital accessibility is important

"Accessibility" is the practice of making your website usable by as many people as possible, regardless of their disability. When **technology** is **accessible**, each user can interact with it in ways that work best for them.

Many people with disabilities use assistive technology to use computers and access the internet. For example, my daughter cannot see the computer monitor, so she uses a screen reader that speaks the text that would otherwise appear on the monitor. People with some vision may use screen enlargement software to magnify the text on the screen.

An accessible website recognizes the differences people with disabilities have and does not require people to see, hear, or use a standard mouse to access the information and services provided. That means that no matter what type of computer or handheld device someone uses, they should be able to access information without encountering any barriers.

What if you could do just one thing to impact the lives of a large segment of your stakeholders who want to consume your digital content but can't – because it's not accessible to them?

Nonprofits often serve as good resources for people with disabilities, and many nonprofits exist specifically to serve those with disabilities. For community service organizations striving to make the world a better place, having an accessible website is an important step toward achieving your mission because it can help to connect more people, donors, and volunteers to your services and programs. It is also the right thing to do.

You may say, "My nonprofit doesn't focus on people with disabilities," or as I have heard before, "No one has complained that our website is not accessible." Sorry, but that's not the right standard or a valid excuse. How do you know if your clients have a disability? Eighty percent of disabilities are "invisible," so you may not know how many people accessing your website have a disability. And that lack of accessibility may also be preventing them from contacting you.

Since the onset of COVID-19, more people are relying on digital services for everyday activities, and technology is more important than ever to people with disabilities for information and community, many of whom are senior citizens (as we age, our vision is diminished).

Benefits of web accessibility

There are important benefits that come with having an ADA-compliant web presence.

1. "Doing the right thing" is a rewarding benefit by itself, a point of pride for employees, board members, volunteers, and even your donors.
2. An accessible website will help you build goodwill toward your brand as you show commitment to people with disabilities.
3. It will improve search engine optimization (SEO) and rank your site more highly in search engine results.
4. An accessible website enables greater engagement, reach, and retention since you will have effectively removed the barriers preventing a large segment of your population from accessing your content.

So, where should a nonprofit begin its accessibility journey?

The best place to start is to:

1. Become familiar with the components of an accessible website.
2. Evaluate your website: Determine if your website is accessible.
3. Validate the accessibility of your content with a manual audit by certified testers; and
4. Make accessibility a priority throughout your organization.

Accessibility process

1. [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#) (**WCAG):** Test your content against the recognized international standards – most people test against what's known as WCAG 2.1 AA. ([DOJ's Guidance provides links to more resources](#) that can help with this.)
2. **Automated Audit**: Conduct an automated audit to find common accessibility issues. Automated scans are useful for flagging potential accessibility, but automated overlays alone **can miss up to 80% of accessibility issues.** They should only be done with an accompanying manual audit to ensure accessibility.
3. **Manual Audit:** Perform manual testing (human judgment is mandatory and essential for identifying some types of accessibility barriers), preferably using a blind or visually impaired tester. A tester can detect up to 70% - 75% of critical accessibility errors. This is the most critical step towards an accessible website and should not be missed.
4. **Remediation:** Remediation is the process your nonprofit takes to correct the errors found by automated and manual audits. Some third-party services can remediate the site for you or, if appropriate, you can use the same developer or designer that created your website or your in-house developer.
5. **Regression Testing:** Regression testing is a second round of automated and manual testing, solely verifying the work done in the Remediation phase.
6. **Monitoring:** Develop a long-term strategy to include ongoing monitoring of existing and new content.
7. **Accessibility Statement:** Prepare an Accessibility Statement, which should include your nonprofit's commitment to accessibility for people with disabilities, the accessibility standard applied (such as WCAG 2.1 AA), and contact information in case users encounter problems. You can view an [example of an accessibility statement](#) on the website of Results One LLC, the company I co-founded.

Laws regarding accessibility

Under Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), **businesses and nonprofits that are open to the public must provide people with disabilities an equal opportunity to access the goods or services that they offer**.

In addition to the ADA, **nonprofits that receive federal funding via grant dollars or other sources must have accessible websites** under Section 504 and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (as amended in 1998).

There has been a sharp [increase in web accessibility lawsuits](#) under Title III, thousands of which claimed that websites were not designed to be accessible to people with disabilities. I predict another year of growth for ADA-based digital lawsuits. Regardless of how a court decides a particular lawsuit, it would mean an enormous burden in time and legal costs for any nonprofit that was the subject of a lawsuit in this area.

On March 21, 2022, the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division released new [Guidance on "Web Accessibility and the ADA"](#) to help organizations ensure their websites are accessible to people with disabilities. DOJ's website offers guidance, sample cases, and additional resources for making your website accessible.

It's the right thing to do and the smart thing to do, too!

Content on your website should be accessible to everyone, including people with disabilities! Ultimately, an accessible website creates a positive experience for all users, not just those with disabilities. We also know it is the morally right thing to do – and the smart thing to do for nonprofits.

*Kim Greenfield Alfonso is a co-founder and Chief Executive Officer of [**Results One LLC**](#), a Washington, DC-based certified minority and women-owned small business that works with organizations embracing DEIA by providing DEI Training, Disability Consulting, and Training and Digital/Website Accessibility Testing and Training. Go to www.resultsonellc.com to learn about training opportunities for you and your staff.*