




City Manager's Office

May 1, 2026

To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council
From: Paul Buddenhagen, City Manager 
Re: Digital Accessibility Progress Update

The City of Berkeley has been improving accessibility of its web content and will continue to prioritize efforts to fully comply with Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

When websites are accessible, they can be used by people with disabilities, whether they are:

- a blind person using screen reader technology to read content aloud,
- a deaf person using captions to watch a video,
- a person with motor impairment who uses only a keyboard and not a mouse to navigate,
- a low-vision person who zooms in 200%,
- or a person with ADHD who uses headings to quickly skim a page.

In many cases, making websites more accessible for people with disabilities also benefits all users; for example, captions are helpful for watching videos on your phone without audio, and headings making content easier for everyone to read.

A Department of Justice [rule on digital accessibility](#) goes into effect April 24, 2027 (extended from a previous deadline of April 2026). The rule sets the Web Content and Accessibility Standards (WCAG) 2.1 AA as the technical standard for all state and local governments' web content and mobile apps.

The City of Berkeley's goal is to provide digital content that meets or exceeds the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 Level AA. This memo will outline accessibility work completed, in progress, and planned.

Work completed to date

With leadership from the City's Communications Division and significant input from every department, the City's launch of the new City of Berkeley website in 2022 marked a huge step forward for accessibility. Conformance with accessibility standards was a key requirement in the RFP for the new website. Prior to launch, the vendor conducted

accessibility tests and corrected issues. Since launch, the Communications Division, which manages berkeleyca.gov, has run automated accessibility scans and flagged further issues for correction. The web developer vendor has made many accessibility improvements. These include updating page templates to use correct heading hierarchy and ensuring that all homepage elements are navigable in the keyboard tab order – a function often used by people with disabilities.

Governance and training

In addition to the technical build of berkeleyca.gov, the Communications Division implemented new governance and regular training to further improve accessibility. The old website had minimal training and oversight, resulting in content that violated accessibility standards.

Since launching the new site in 2022, the Communications team has led ten accessibility-specific trainings for web editing staff from City departments. Topics have included: Digital Accessibility 101, Document Accessibility in Word, and Writing for Accessibility (covering alt text, hyperlinks, and headings). Accessibility is also woven into all other training sessions for web editors, which happen on a bi-monthly basis. In 2023, the City contracted with a vendor to provide a 16-hour accessibility bootcamp.

Nearly 100 staff citywide have access to post to the City website. Communications staff review these staff's proposed webpage updates daily to check for accessibility, including use of plain language, descriptive text for hyperlinks, and appropriate use of headings. Alt text for images is required by the website software.

Public Works has also hired a vendor, Crawford Technology, to help remediate PDF documents. PDFs are particularly challenging to make work for people with disabilities, and without in-house tools or skills, outsourcing to the vendor is necessary to respond to accessibility complaints.

Work in progress

In July 2025, the Commission on Disability raised concern about the accessibility of berkeleyca.gov.

Also in July 2025, the City Manager identified website accessibility as one of his Citywide priorities. This action facilitated a wide range of activities to be led by the Communications Division.

In the past months, Communications Division staff have been working closely with the Commission and with staff to address accessibility concerns.

To facilitate collaboration, three members of the Commission on Disability have been meeting regularly with staff from Communications and the Public Works ADA Program Coordinator as part of an ad hoc working group on digital accessibility. This group has met five times since August 2025. Input from the working group has directly informed staff's efforts.

Digital Accessibility Task Force

To address accessibility comprehensively across the City, the Communications Division convened a Digital Accessibility Task Force with 22 staff representing 11 City departments, the Auditor, and the Rent Board. The task force has met four times as a full group and bi-weekly as an optional open forum. Communications met one-on-one with each department in October 2025 to understand each department's specific challenges.

One key task for this staff group is to audit documents on berkeleyca.gov. Documents create issues for people with disabilities because they are typically not accessible by default, and most staff creating documents do not have the expertise to make them accessible.

When the task force first convened in July, there were over 16,000 PDFs on berkeleyca.gov. Those documents were assessed and each department has a spreadsheet listing their website PDFs. Task force members took on the work of identifying:

1. which documents are essential for accessing City services, and therefore highest priority to make accessible, and
2. which documents are no longer needed and can be archived.

So far, staff have identified:

- 257 documents essential to accessing services
- 3,000+ obsolete documents to delete, reducing the total number of documents by 20%

Another key task is to identify and assess accessibility of all websites used by the City of Berkeley. The City uses a number of sites external to berkeleyca.gov, including:

- Third-party tools such as CivicRec for recreation registration, or Accela for permit processing
- Custom-built sites such as BerkeleyFireSafe.org and the Police Transparency Hub
- Social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Bluesky

The task force catalogued 87 external sites used across the City, of which 34 are social media accounts. Of the remaining 53, 15 support or partially support WCAG. Staff are working with vendors to identify accessibility status and develop a plan for full compliance.

In addition, task force members have learned accessibility skills and are spreading awareness within their departments.

Staff training

There are now pages on the City's intranet to support staff awareness. A Digital Accessibility page provides an overview of the topic and guidance for documents, webpages, social media, videos, and third-party websites. An Accessible Documents page provides step-by-step guidance on how to create an accessible document in Word.

The Communications Division also sent out a four-part email series to all staff about digital accessibility in November-December. These all-staff emails provided bite-size learning to help staff understand the importance of accessibility and their role.

Planning is underway for future live staff training to provide hands-on guidance.

UC Berkeley Civic Innovation Challenge

Digital Accessibility was one of the city's challenge areas for UC Berkeley student teams to work on as part of the UC Berkeley Civic Innovation Challenge.

Staff worked with UC Berkeley student groups to develop innovative solutions to the PDF accessibility problem. Three groups vied to address digital accessibility for the City. One of the proposed solutions won the overall challenge, which included a variety of other issues facing the City.

Consultant for digital accessibility

An informal RFP process was conducted to identify a consultant to support accessibility work, since the City currently has no staff with this expertise.

The Blind Institute of Technology (BIT), a non-profit run by professionals with disabilities, was selected as the vendor. BIT has started work to:

- Conduct an accessibility audit of berkeleyca.gov to identify any barriers to people with disabilities
- Compile all issues in a report for web developers, re-check the site after issues are addressed, and write a statement documenting the accessibility status
- Host two live sessions for all staff: an empathy workshop by blind founder Mike Hess, and a demonstration of a screen reader in action by a native assistive technology user
- Meet with City and community stakeholders to develop a Digital Accessibility Transition Plan that will have clear deadlines, deliverables, and success metrics

Updates to berkeleyca.gov

The Communications Division worked with the City Attorney's Office, ADA Coordinator, and Commission on Disability to update the [Accessibility Statement](#) on the City website.

This page provides contact information for the ADA Coordinator, who can address any accessibility complaints. The statement also identifies steps the City has taken to date

and known limitations. This statement will further develop after the consultant completes their audit.

At the request of the Commission on Disability, the Communications Division added a required field to all webpages for events on berkeleyca.gov so that it includes staff contact information. All berkeleyca.gov event pages now include “For questions or to request an accessibility accommodation, please contact [email and/or phone].” Additionally, the web developer vendor installed the Editoria11y module, which provides in-place feedback for web editors on common accessibility errors.

At the request of the Commission on Disability, the Communications Division worked with the commission secretary to support posting meeting agendas as HTML webpages, which are generally more accessible than PDF documents. These agenda pages are similar to City Council HTML meeting agenda pages. This was a pilot for one commission. In order to roll out across legislative bodies, staff would need to work with the web developer to create a custom content type so that all meeting agendas follow a standard format.

Knowledge-sharing from peers

The Communications Division has been in contact with the City of Palo Alto, City of Sunnyvale, City of Oakland, UC Berkeley Digital Accessibility team, and Berkeley Public Library to share knowledge and approaches during this transition to the new rule. All state and local governments are facing similar challenges as the deadline approaches.

Future work

The City is working towards full compliance with the federal WCAG 2.1 AA requirement.

Given the City’s current budget constraints, funding is not available for staff or contractor positions dedicated to managing digital accessibility.

The City is exploring acquiring software tools to support digital accessibility:

- **Online form building software** to transition from PDF forms which need to be printed, filled out, and scanned to an online, fillable form. This would improve the experience for all users, and save staff time by having a digital-first workflow.
- **PDF remediation software** to support staff with making PDFs accessible. Currently, staff use MS Word and Adobe Acrobat, but remediation in those tools is limited and challenging. Remediation tools provide a more user-friendly and AI-powered interface to make remediation faster and less frustrating.
- **Accessibility overlay** say they can provide a screen-reader friendly HTML version of PDFs on demand.

Holding vendors accountable for delivering WCAG 2.1 AA compliant products is another element of the project. The City Manager has requested the City Attorney’s Office and Finance to develop standard language for contract boilerplates requiring that any

vendor-created documents and websites are WCAG-compliant. For existing vendors who cannot make their website accessible, the City may need to switch vendors when the contract term expires.

The City of Berkeley has done significant work towards meeting the accessibility standards, and that work will continue as we focus on institutionalizing accessibility as part of daily operations.

cc: Senior Executive Team
Crystal Hadley, Digital Communications Coordinator, Communications Division