Centering Digital Accessibility in Hennepin County

A Digital Service Network Spotlight

DSN Spotlights are short-form project profiles that feature exciting work happening across our network of digital government practitioners. Spotlights celebrate our members' stories, lift up actionable takeaways for other practitioners, and put the artifacts we host in the DSN Resource Library in context.

Background

In January 2022, Hennepin County (MN) adopted its first digital accessibility policy. The policy mandates that all of the County's digital products — new and existing, employee- and public-facing — comply with specific accessibility standards.

The policy reflects Hennepin County's commitment to serve all residents and builds on a longstanding, staff-driven focus on digital accessibility. To implement the policy, the Office of Digital Experience (ODX) is building a suite of trainings and resources that will equip staff with the tools they need to prioritize and improve digital accessibility across County services.

The DSN spoke with staff from ODX — Megan Evans Seeds, chief digital officer, and Lisa Yang, digital accessibility coordinator — to discuss their efforts to help center digital accessibility across Hennepin County government.

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Hennepin County's vision for digital accessibility

Hennepin County's digital accessibility policy outlines a vision: *Everyone should be able to easily interact with the County online. This includes people with visual, hearing, motor, and cognitive disabilities. These disabilities could be permanent, temporary, or situational.*

To help realize this vision, the policy requires all County websites, applications, tools, and vendor tech comply with version 2.1 of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). In so doing, the policy promotes greater accessibility in all of the County's digital products. ODX is largely responsible for implementing the policy, and their strategy is to bolster existing staff interest and capacity in user-centered design, development, and testing, and make clear the connections between digital accessibility and advancing the County's equity goals.

Top-down and bottom-up: ODX's dual approach to prioritizing digital accessibility

ODX's interest in digital accessibility began as early as 2013 and was "innate," CDO Seeds said — stemming from a shared belief that "accessibility and usability go hand in hand. It's difficult to make something that's usable if it's not accessible, and vice versa."

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> Chief Digital Officer, Hennepin County

But operationalizing that belief was not straightforward. "The initial challenge was that we said 'we prioritize and value accessibility', but [in terms of] actually confirming or validating that our stuff is accessible ... there was still a pretty wide gap," Seeds said.

A "bottom-up" tactic ODX used to help close the gap was launching a monthly group open to all Hennepin County staff called the User Experience Community of Practice (UXCOP). "[The UXCOP] is where we started inviting folks — whether they were developers, designers, or program managers — to talk about usability, accessibility, and the user experience," Seeds explained.

Even with the UXCOP in place, demands on County staff meant it was often easy for digital accessibility to slip down priority lists. Making digital accessibility a requirement, instead of an extra, non-obligatory effort, would be crucial to scaling the work. "We found that even among teams that were interested in and excited about prioritizing digital accessibility, staff requested more explicit organizational expectations to help mobilize support and resources within projects," Seeds said.

But the bottom-up approach of engaging employees through the UXCOP enabled the top-down policy change. "The [UXCOP] was a great way to bring together people who were already interested in digital accessibility," Seeds said. "The group helped us socialize and iterate on ideas and ask staff to champion digital accessibility as we were building out the policy."

ODX worked with a long list of collaborators that spanned organizational boundaries to draft the policy, including: IT, the Office of Broadband and Digital Inclusion, the library web team, the County's policy team, an ADA coordinator, Communications, the County Attorney's Office, and Outreach and Community Supports. The final version of the policy was adopted in January 2022 with full support from County leadership, and Yang was hired as the County's first digital accessibility coordinator to support implementation.

Implementing digital accessibility: Hennepin's four areas of action

To implement the policy, ODX developed and is currently working toward four goals:

1. Conduct usability testing and community listening programs that are inclusive of people living with disabilities. ODX is building greater capacity for accessibility-specific testing of the County's digital products. According to Seeds, it has been helpful so far to procure accessibility testing services, and ODX is looking to further build that capacity in-house down the line.

2. Provide county employees with digital accessibility training according to their role. ODX and IT have both developed free courses on digital accessibility for staff. Currently, IT offers a digital accessibility "basics" course. Building on that foundational coursework, ODX, in partnership with an external vendor, offers five in-depth courses:

   + Understanding Users with Disabilities

   + Web Accessibility Basics

   + Alternative Text Tag Basics

   + Self-Testing for Accessibility

   + Introduction to WCAG 2.1 AA.

3. Plan with accessibility in mind throughout a project's lifecycle. ODX maintains that accessibility should be embedded from the outset of digital projects. "Staff ask us: 'What if we have to change our entire workflow?' We have to help people feel comfortable with that, and let them know that that is totally fine, because we're doing it to make things better for everyone — and it's better to realize that upfront," Yang added. To support staff in prioritizing accessibility planning from day one, the team helps update project timelines to allow for more user research, but much of the real work is about long-term culture change: "A tenet we emphasize is that everyone has a role in ensuring accessibility – it's not just the developers, " Seeds said. "Advocacy by project sponsors goes a long way in ensuring that teams have the time and space to ensure that what they're creating is accessible."

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LISA YANG
Digital Accessibility Coordinator, Hennepin County

4. Influence third-party and external vendors and hold them accountable to addressing accessibility issues with their applications and programs. Yang is partnering with staff to put in place strategies and procedures to help them better evaluate vendors and RFPs with digital accessibility in mind, taking advantage of tools like VPAT. "If we're not driving that change with vendors, it's not just going to happen on its own," she stressed.

What's next for digital accessibility in Hennepin's County?

A large network of people and teams across Hennepin County are collectively responsible for the ongoing implementation of the digital accessibility policy and maintenance of its web standards, particularly as the County has kicked off a .gov domain migration.

Yang's leadership as digital accessibility coordinator is crucial to maintaining momentum and ensuring compliance. She works closely with the policy's stakeholders and hopes to further integrate the work with ADA compliance work in the County: "Digital and physical accessibility are two sides of the same coin. We have a lot to learn by looking beyond just digital," Yang shared.

To continue building bottom-up enthusiasm and capacity, this year ODX launched a Digital Experience (DX) Champions certificate for County staff. To become a certified "champion," staff must complete a series of racial equity and UX coursework which highlights the important connections between advancing digital accessibility and advancing digital equity; familiarize themselves with the digital accessibility policy and web standards; be an active member of two communities of practice, including the UXCOP; and pass a knowledge assessment.

Lessons learned

A dual bottom-up and top-down approach can forge a path for new digital policies and ensure their sustainability. ODX and its partners created a top-down policy mandate and bottom-up staff excitement and capacity for advancing digital accessibility. The policy provided further momentum and a clearer course for work that was already underway.

Multi-disciplinary teams make for better digital transformation work. Good digital work in government is often done by multi-disciplinary teams, which inform digital initiatives with diverse perspectives and help generate stronger outcomes. As part of the policy development and implementation process, ODX integrated (1) the disciplines of usability and accessibility, (2) digital and physical accessibility experts, and (3) diverse stakeholders (not just "digital" roles) from across the County.

Resources and artifacts

To see how this work was put into practice, explore the following assets in the DSN Resource Library:

+ Hennepin County's Digital Accessibility Policy and Accessibility landing page
+ Hennepin County's web standards
+ Hennepin County's pattern library
+ Hennepin County's writing guide