The California State Auditor released the following report today:

California State Government Websites
Departments Must Improve Website Accessibility So That Persons With Disabilities Have Comparable Access to State Services Online

BACKGROUND

With nearly 47 percent of Californians reporting that they use the Internet to access government services and approximately 4 million of its residents living with a disability, ensuring that persons with disabilities have comparable access to the State's online government services is critical. State entities are required to comply with certain federal laws and regulations (known as Section 508 standards), which mandate that electronic and information technology, such as websites, be accessible to persons with disabilities in a manner that is comparable to the access and use by those without disabilities. In addition to these standards, a nongovernmental organization—World Wide Web Consortium (W3C)—developed web accessibility standards, which the State adopted, that together address the needs of users who may have a range of disabilities.

KEY FINDINGS

During our review of the State's compliance with web accessibility standards at four California departments—the Department of Human Resources (CalHR), Community Colleges, Covered California, and Franchise Tax Board—we noted the following:

- We found many violations of accessibility standards—some more severe than others—making it difficult for users with disabilities to navigate the sites. Some violations made the underlying content inaccessible to persons with disabilities.

  ✓ Some violations in CalHR's jobs site forced users taking an online exam with the assistance of a screen reader to spend more time and effort completing the exam and created a higher risk for those users to inadvertently respond to exam questions with incorrect information that could cause applicants to miss employment opportunities.

  ✓ Community Colleges' online application prevented screen reader users from applying to college online if they took too long to complete registration pages. This violation has since been addressed.

  ✓ A violation in the registration process for Franchise Tax Board's CalFile application could prevent some users from being able to complete and file their California tax returns online using CalFile.

  ✓ One critical violation on Covered California's website prevented persons with motor disabilities who are unable to use a computer mouse from applying for health insurance through the website—Covered California corrected this issue when we brought it to their attention.

- There is a lack of regular accessibility testing—although most departments we reviewed conducted some accessibility testing of their web-based services before releasing the web products to the public, the Franchise Tax Board is the only agency that regularly tested subsequent updates to its website.

- California's web accessibility standards, adopted in 2006, are outdated and do not reflect current best practices for ensuring comparable access for persons with disabilities, and statewide training on web accessibility is not required.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

We made many recommendations to the Legislature and the departments, including the following:

- The Legislature should require that all state websites comply with updated web accessibility standards developed by W3C and should designate the California Department of Technology as the lead agency responsible for monitoring changes to accessibility standards, providing training to state entities on web accessibility issues, and reporting on state agencies' web accessibility testing and results.

- Each of the departments we reviewed should correct the accessibility violations we identified in our report. Also, state departments should develop and follow written accessibility testing approaches for updates to their websites, and should document the sites tested, errors found, and errors corrected. Further, state departments should also provide information to the public about how to complain about website accessibility problems and track complaints received and their resolution of the complaints.

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