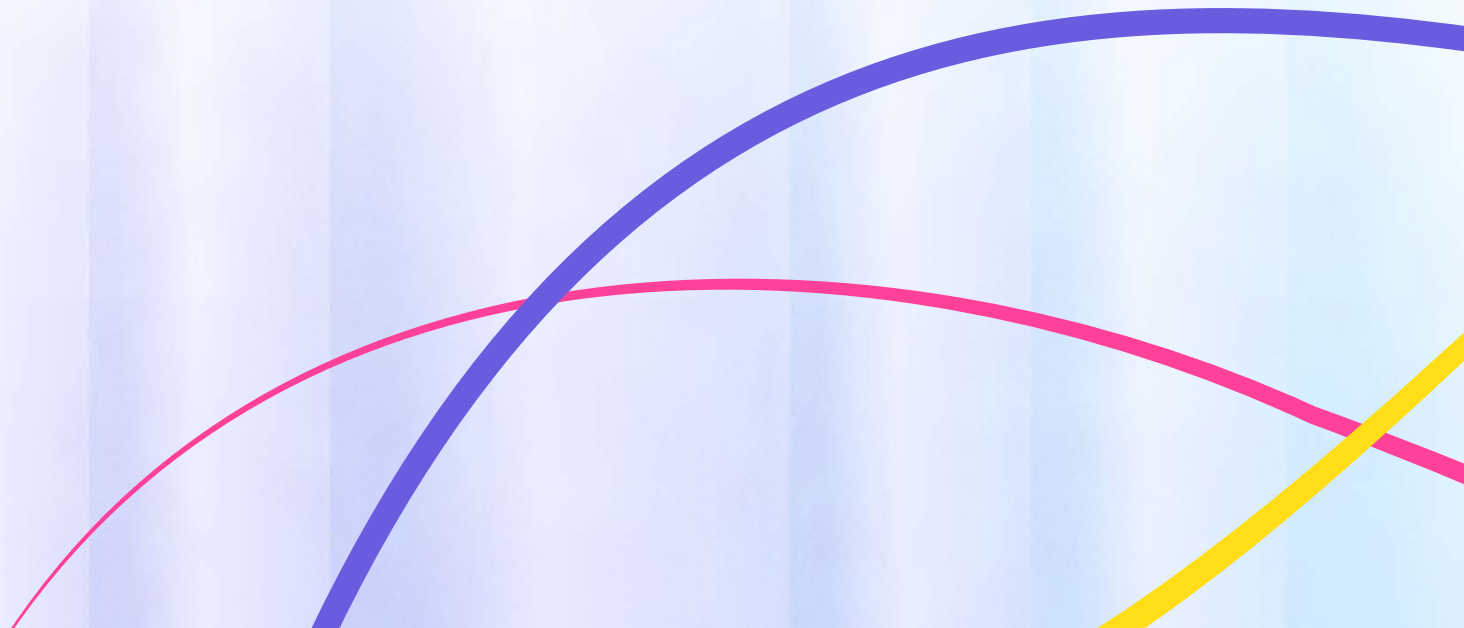


15/

Most Common Ways Government Websites Fail WCAG 2.1 AA

The real, fixable level A and AA failures we see across 4,718 State, County, and Local US Government websites.



Chances are, you already know your website isn't perfect.

Let me paint a picture: one day, you woke up with an inherited CMS, a few thousand pages, more PDFs than the county has parking spaces, and a backlog that quietly resets itself every time a department posts a new agenda. A backlog that got longer in the few brief moments you took to read this paragraph.

There are issues everywhere, and never enough time, money, or people to handle them. And yes, many of those issues are accessibility issues.

But chances are, I didn't have to paint the picture. It's one you're already all too familiar with.

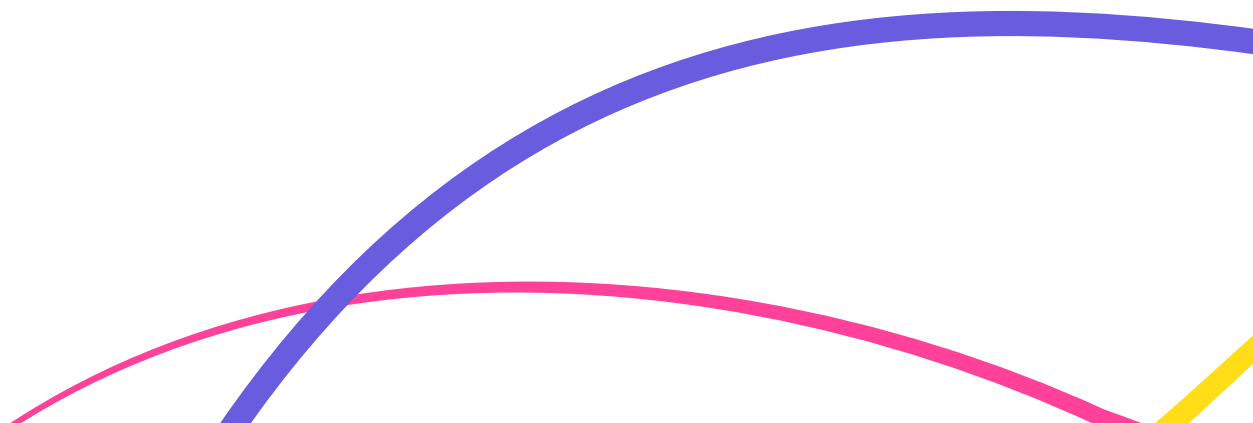
That's not a dig. It's the job. There are accessibility issues on every government website. We should know. We checked 4,718 of them. Accessibility isn't a thing you finish, it's a moving target you chase while doing nine other things. The standards get stricter, the site keeps growing, and "we'll fix it next week" becomes next quarter becomes next fiscal year. Nobody's caught up. You're not behind; you're normal.

But the people who can't use your site aren't a rounding error: they're constituents. Someone using a screen reader to file for benefits. A resident renewing a permit with a keyboard because a mouse isn't an option.

A parent zooming in on their phone to check whether school is closed. When the site fails them, it isn't a glitch, it's a person unable to reach a public service they're entitled to. And it's the kind of failure that turns into a complaint, a demand letter, exactly the wrong kind of headline.

The Department of Justice's updated Title II rule makes WCAG 2.1 AA the legal standard for state and local government. The deadlines were extended to April 2027 for entities serving 50,000 or more and to April 2028 for smaller entities and special districts. But your website is still being used, today, by people who need it to work.

That's okay. We're here to help all concerned parties: quickly and efficiently making your website more accessible (which, in this instance, also means a great deal less sueable. Sueable isn't a word, but you get what we mean.)



About the Data

Silktide runs one of the world's largest public accessibility benchmarks: the Silktide Index. We score thousands of organizations against WCAG. The best government sites clear 98 out of 100 (hello, Illinois). Plenty land in the teens.

A handful don't load well enough to score at all. We've been scanning government websites every month for years.

We took the 15 most common WCAG 2.1 AA failures we see across US government website and put them here. And we mean it literally: every failure in this report is part of the WCAG 2.1 AA standard. No "best practice." No "where the puck is heading." Just the legal floor, ranked by how often you're actually tripping over it. Think of it less as a scolding and more as the to-do list you'd have written yourself, if you weren't doing four jobs.

Curious where you actually stand?

We've already scored your agency (and thousands of its peers) in the Silktide Index. It's public, and it's free. Where do you rank? Go find out before someone else points it out for you.

[Find your agency on the Silktide Index](#)



“That peace of mind of knowing that you’ve got a product that is built for this, and to make sure that not only is everything legally compliant, but also that it’s being done in the best practice. And it’s being done in a way that’s going to help usability for everybody.”

— Ken Smith, Web Communications Specialist, City of Bryan, Texas

How often each failure shows up across US government

Failure	WCAG	Level	How often we see it
The same link text, different destinations	2.4.4	A	61%
Navigation isn't coded as a list	1.3.1	A	49%
Low text contrast	1.4.3	AA	48%
Controls screen readers can't use	4.1.2	A	48%
Duplicate element IDs	4.1.1	A	44%
Vague link text ("read more")	2.4.4	A	43%
Form fields with low contrast	1.4.11	AA	43%
No visible focus indicator	2.4.7	AA	40%
Headings with no text	1.3.1	A	37%
Autofill purpose missing	1.3.5	AA	36%
Page won't reflow on small screens	1.4.10	AA	34%
Page has no top-level heading	1.3.1	A	33%
Page language not specified	3.1.1	A	32%
Data tables missing header cells	1.3.1	A	30%
Links signalled by color alone	1.4.1	A	29%

The 15 failures

15 most common accessibility failures on US Government websites



01/ The same link text points to different places

Link Purpose (In Context) · Level A
~61% of government sites

Government sites run on links. Departments have links, services, forms, and notices have links, sometimes it feels like the links have links. The trouble starts when five of them all read “Application” or “Department” but each goes somewhere different.

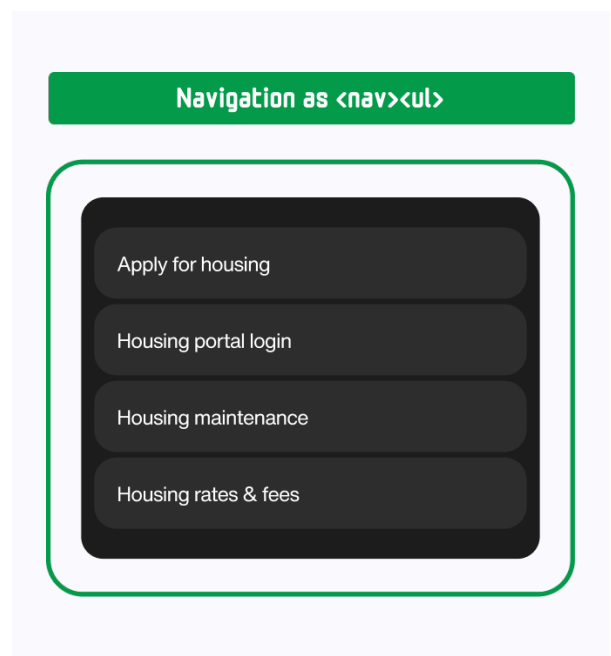
A screen-reader user who pulls up the page’s list of links sees the same phrase over and over with no way to tell them apart. It’s the single most common failure we see across government websites, and it’s usually a content habit, not a code problem.

02/ Navigation and link groups aren’t coded as lists

Info and Relationships · Level A
~49% of government sites

Nav bars and footers full of links should be a structured list, so a screen reader can announce “list, 12 items” and let users step through.

On nearly half of government sites they’re a loose pile of links instead, stripping out that grouping right where people navigate to find a service. Looks fine on screen; reads like confetti to assistive tech.

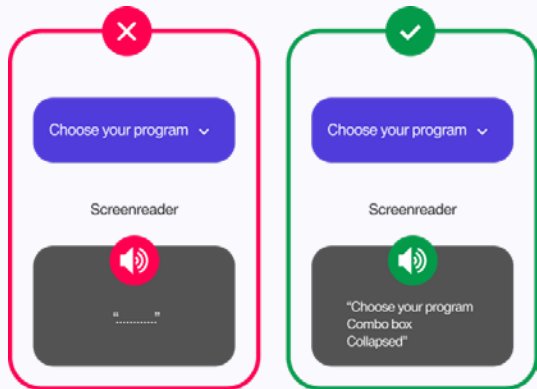




03/ Insufficient text contrast

Contrast (Minimum) · Level AA
~48% of government sites

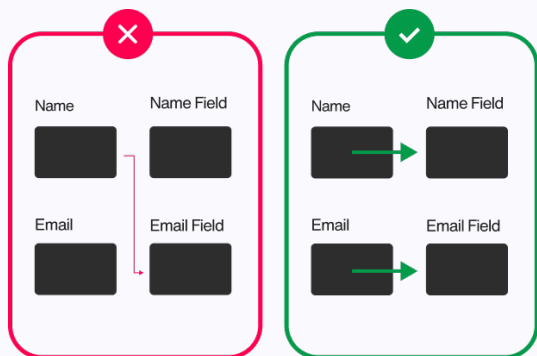
Nav bars and footers full of links should be a structured list, so a screen reader can announce “list, 12 items” and let users step through. On nearly half of government sites they’re a loose pile of links instead, stripping out that grouping right where people navigate to find a service.



04/ Custom controls screen readers can't use

Name, Role, Value · Level A
~48% of government sites

Contrast is the brightness gap between text and its background; AA requires at least 4.5:1 for normal text. Nearly half of government sites fall short: light-grey body copy, pale link colors, or text floated over a hero photo of city hall. Anyone with low vision, color blindness, or a phone in daylight is left squinting at the very notices they came to read.



05/ Duplicate element IDs

Parsing · Level A
~44% of government sites

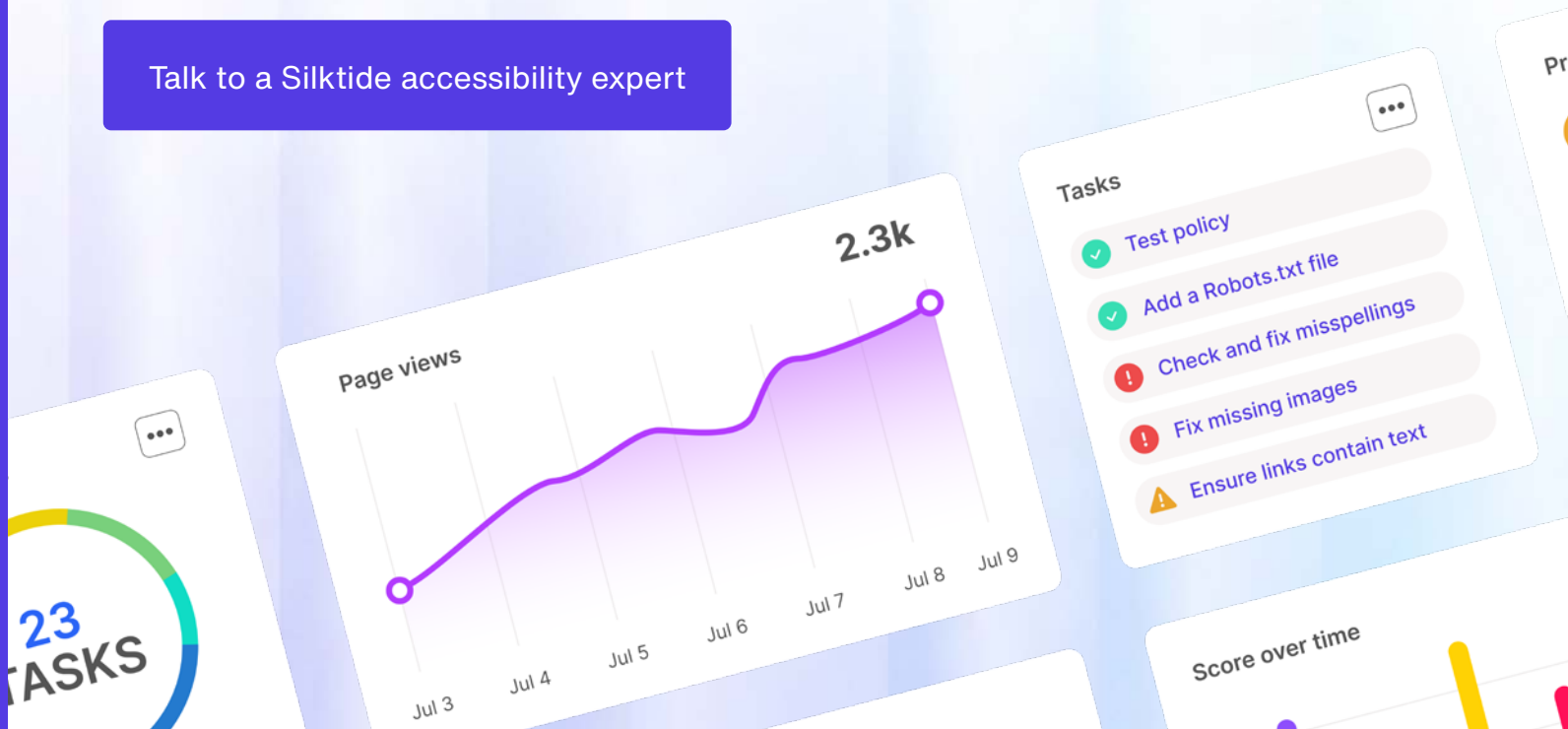
Every element ID on a page is supposed to be unique. It’s how labels, ARIA, and the scripts behind a form find the right thing to point at. Reuse the same ID twice (easy to do when pages are assembled from shared templates and components, as most government sites are) and those connections quietly cross their wires: a label stops announcing, a form field loses its name. More than 4 in 10 government sites do it somewhere.



You could check all this by hand. You won't, though.

Nobody can manually test thousands of pages and PDFs against dozens of WCAG criteria, then keep them fixed every time a department updates a page. That's not a knock on your team, it's arithmetic. Silktide makes sure you'll always be the first to know what's broken on your website, and exactly how to fix it. All 15 of these mistakes, plus the hundreds that never make a top-15 list.

[Talk to a Silktide accessibility expert](#)

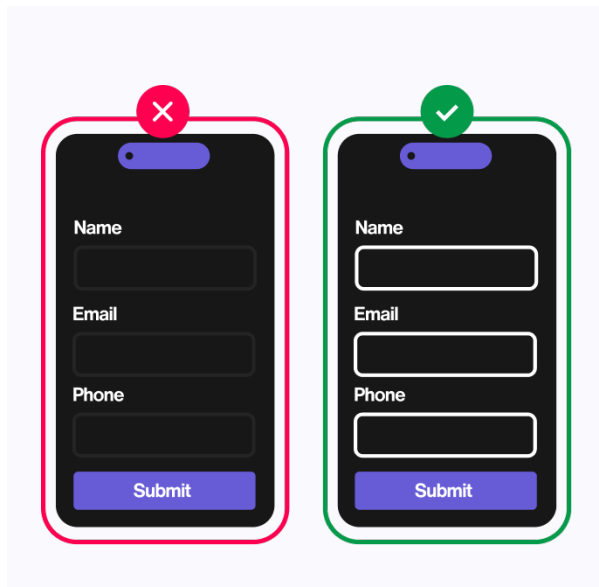




06/ Links don't explain their purpose ("read more")

Link Purpose (In Context) · Level A
~43% of government sites

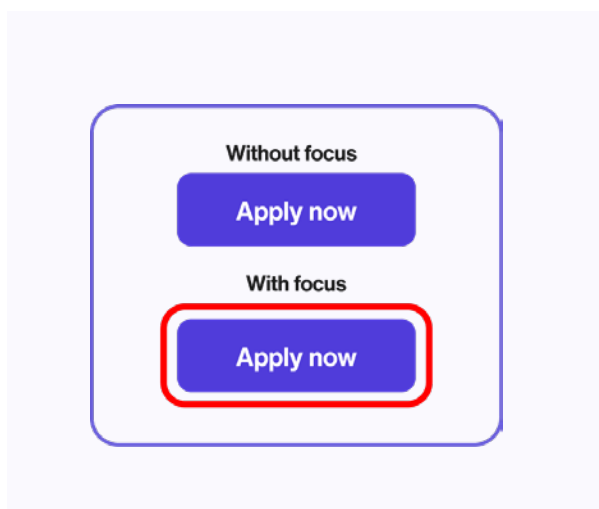
Link text should stand on its own: "Apply for a permit" explains what it does while "click here" does not. More than 4 in 10 government sites still lean on "read more" and "learn more," which tell screen-reader users nothing, especially when they pull up a list of every link on the page. A screen full of identical "read more"s is a dead end.



07/ Form controls don't contrast with their surroundings

Non-text Contrast · Level AA
~43% of government sites

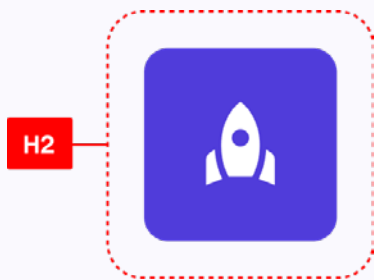
Non-text contrast covers the visible edges of inputs, checkboxes, and buttons—they need to stand out from the background too. On more than 4 in 10 government sites they're so faint you can't see where a field begins, so low-vision users miss them and forms go unfinished. It's the text-contrast problem's quieter cousin, and it matters most on exactly the forms that deliver services: permits, benefits, registrations.



08/ No visible focus indicator on controls

Focus Visible · Level AA
~40% of government sites

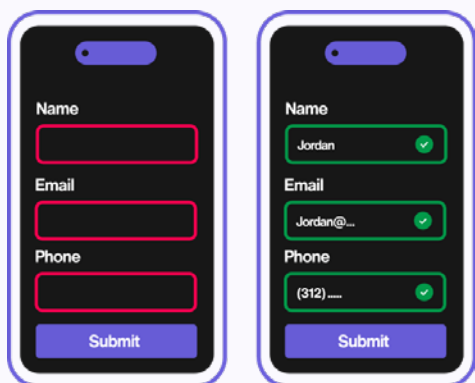
Tab through a page instead of using a mouse, and a focus indicator (an outline or highlight) should show which link or button you're on. On 4 in 10 government sites it's missing or invisible. Keyboard users are left guessing where they are and what they're about to activate.



09/Headings with no text

Info and Relationships · Level A
~37% of government sites

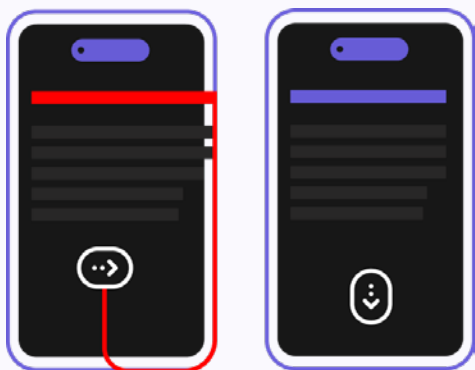
Screen-reader users navigate a page by jumping between its headings. An empty heading (a heading tag wrapped around an icon, an image, or nothing at all) shows up in that list as a blank rung on the ladder. Around a third of government sites have them, sending users to a heading that announces nothing and explains less.



10/ Field purpose not identified for autofill

Identify Input Purpose · Level AA
~36% of government sites

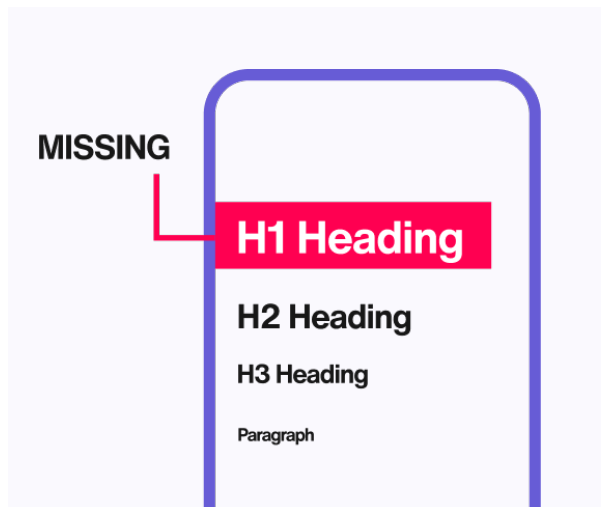
This rule asks sites to label common fields like name, email, address in code so browsers can autofill them. It's not just inaccessible—on the application and inquiry forms that are the service, that friction quietly costs you completed submissions too.



11/ Page won't reflow on small screens

Reflow · Level AA
~34% of government sites

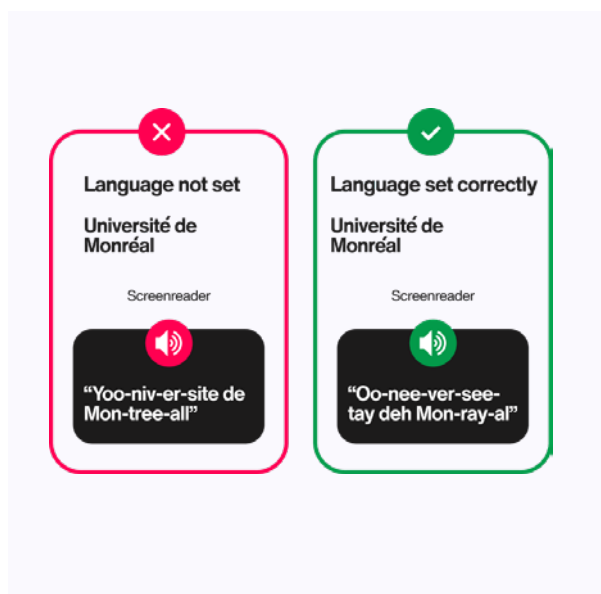
Reflow means content stacks into a single readable column when you zoom in or shrink the screen. A third of government sites don't, trapping anyone who magnifies past 400% or browses on a smaller phone in awkward two-way scrolling. Given how many people reach government services on a phone, that's a lot of trapped readers.



12/ Page missing a top-level heading

Info and Relationships · Level A
~33% of government sites

Every page should open with a top-level heading (an H1) stating what it's about — the anchor screen-reader users navigate from. Around 1 in 3 government pages have none, confiscating that map entirely. Bonus sting: it also dents your search ranking and scannability for everyone else.



13/ Page language not specified

Language of Page · Level A
~32% of government sites

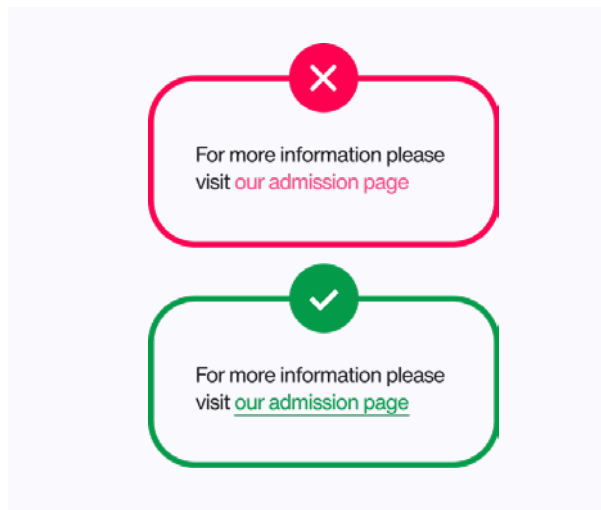
A single line of code tells assistive tech what language a page is in, so a screen reader pronounces it correctly. Without it, English gets read with the wrong rules, and pages translated for non-English-speaking residents are mis-voiced entirely. For governments serving multilingual communities, this one punches above its weight, and it's quietly becoming more common, not less.



14/ Data tables missing header cells

Info and Relationships · Level A
~30% of government sites

Government websites run on tables: budgets, schedules, fee lists, election results. A proper table marks its header cells so a screen reader can say “row: Permit type, column: Fee” as the user moves through it. On about 3 in 10 sites the headers aren’t marked, so the table becomes a flat stream of numbers with no idea which is which.



15/ Links signalled by color alone

Use of Color · Level A
~29% of government sites

If the only thing distinguishing a link from surrounding text is its color, anyone who can't perceive that color—like color-blind users, or anyone on a washed-out screen—can't tell it's a link at all. Nearly 3 in 10 government sites rely on color alone. The fix is usually one line of CSS: bring back the underline.



"Silktide empowers us to go beyond the basics. It doesn't just flag issues – it tells us why they matter and how to fix them. That clarity has been a game-changer."

— Ken Wiess, Sarasota County Government, FL

Solve all 15 — and the hundreds we didn't list

Your web team can't audit thousands of pages and PDFs by hand, keep them fixed as the site changes, and stay ahead of a demand letter. At least not without cloning someone. Silktide is a complete web quality assurance platform that provides best-in-class automated testing, training, and manual auditing for accessibility.

We find every issue in this report, explain each one in plain English your whole team understands, and show your accessibility score ticking up as you close them out. Residents get served. Legal stays quiet. You get your evenings back.

Ready to see it in action?

[Talk to a Silktide expert](#)[Find your agency on the Silktide Index](#)

“Silktide is the primary source of information to tell us which pages PDFs don’t need to be live anymore. It will help us establish content governance moving forward.”

Stacey Wuest, Digital & Web Services IT Manager, Travis County, TX

About the data: figures reflect Silktide’s automated accessibility testing across US government in the Silktide Index — state government, county and city/local government, and public school districts — as of May 2026. Each percentage is the share of audited government sites where the issue appears. Criterion labels follow Silktide’s own checks. Every criterion in this report is part of WCAG 2.1 Level A or AA, the standard adopted under ADA Title II.

silktide/

