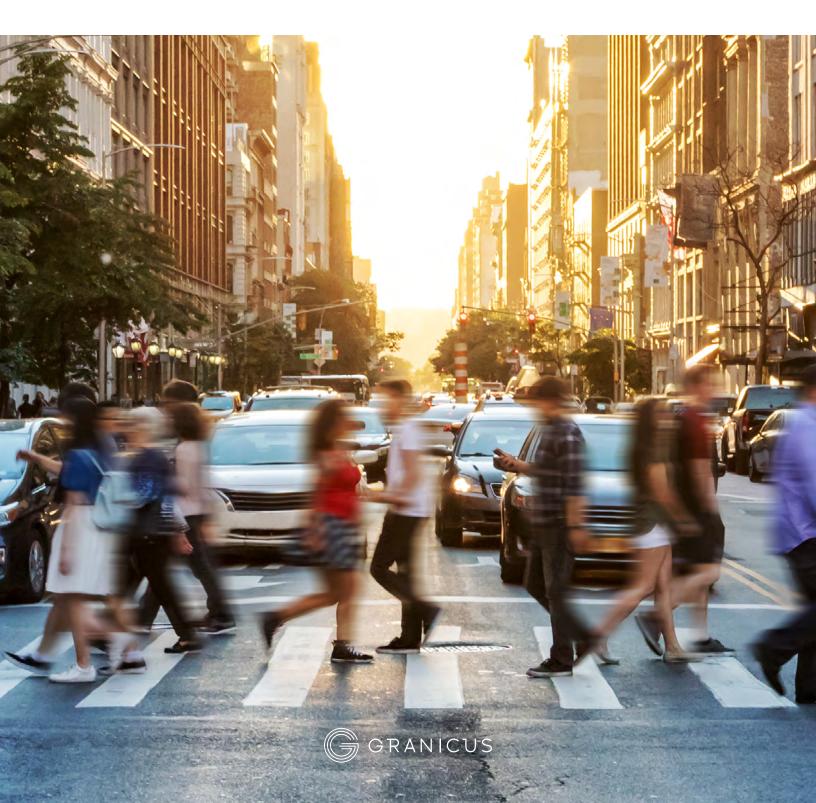# Access to Government

Connecting with Hard-to-Reach Populations Through Equitable Customer Experiences

GRANICUS

Introduction

In an ideal world, the line of communication between government and the people it serves is like a two-way highway with information and feedback flowing — at high speeds — in both directions, resulting in mutually beneficial outcomes. Sadly, in many instances, this is not (at all) the case. In most communities, very few residents are actively involved in public policy, leaving underserved, hard-to-reach communities quietly — and systematically — excluded from helpful government programs and initiatives. The Cornell School of Law defines underserved populations as "populations who face barriers in accessing and using victim services and includes populations underserved because of geographic location, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, underserved racial and ethnic populations underserved because of special needs (such as language barriers, disabilities, alienage status, or age)." Technology has emerged as an obvious bridge connecting people and government, but government entities must put forth a concerted effort to reach the difficult-to-reach.

The legal stipulations of an equitable customer experience.

Residents have begun to demand more modern ways to connect with government. But on top of that social pressure, government entities now have a binding responsibility to advance racial equity and support for underserved communities through the federal government. In January 2021, the Biden Administration released an executive order [designed to comprehensively approach the advancement for all](#), "including people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality. Affirmatively advancing equity, civil rights, racial justice, and equal opportunity is the responsibility of the whole of our government." At the end of the same year, the Biden Administration released another executive order [designed to transform federal customer experience and service delivery to rebuild trust in government](#). The order held government entities accountable for designing and delivering modern, navigable services that are simple to use, accessible, equitable, protective, transparent, and responsive for all people of the United States, especially historically underserved communities.

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

The University of Michigan was looking for a way to [engage at-risk youth in public policy decisions](#). In order to reach this generation largely absent from policy decisions, the University of Michigan leveraged Granicus to reach **1,000 adolescents and young adults with over 60 text-based surveys**, ultimately giving them a voice in key policy decisions, from student debt to healthcare, that impact their everyday lives.

Those executive orders only punctuated the existing set of stipulations outlined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities. Most people are at least vaguely aware of the physical stipulations for government and commercial facilities, but there is also a set of digital standards that create a web and public meetings experience that meets the needs of all individuals.

Install web-powered screen reading software.

There are others, but Google Chrome, for example, provides an extension for the web that reads web-based text from html and JavaScript, etc. aloud for the visually impaired.
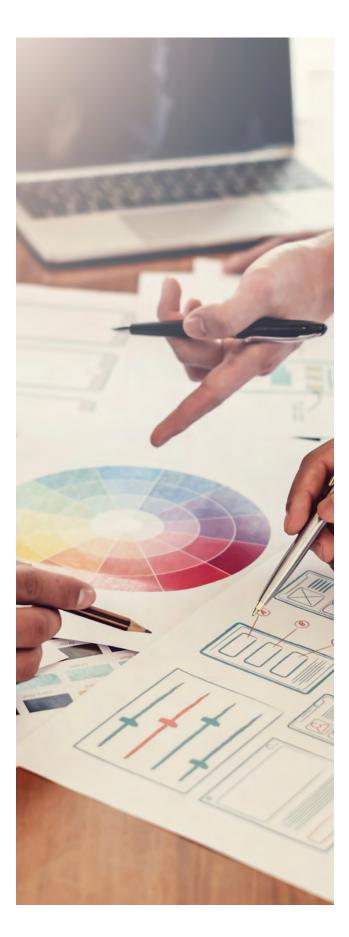
Tag PDFs properly.

The visually impaired often use screen readers (like the one mentioned above) to consume content audibly. In this context, PDFs are identified as single, inaccessible images. To make them accessible to the visually impaired, make sure all PDFs with text are properly tagged so they can be read with common screen reading software.

Include alt text on all images.

Adding alternative text for images is a primary principle of accessibility. When determining appropriate alternative text for images, context is key. Alt text should tell your audience as much about the images in as few words as possible.

Establish and list a designated ADA contact.

At a minimum, post a statement to this effect: "This organization does not discriminate on the basis of disability and identifies the following contact to coordinate ADA-related requests." List the established ADA contact by name along with a way to contact them.

Index public meeting agendas and minutes.

Timestamp meeting materials for easy access to a specific point in the content.

Livestream public meetings on an accessible platform.

Social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, or Snapchat are not inherently ADA accessible, so broadcasting live on these platforms isn't either. To ensure public meetings are fully compliant, choose a vendor that prioritizes accessibility.

Use closed captioning on public meeting videos.

Accessible public meeting videos include a transcript of text that follows along with the meeting called closed captioning or text versions of audio content. Closed captions should be available for people with hearing disabilities so they can also follow along with the public meeting.

Pair translation technology with your entire digital presence.

Translation technology must support a wholistic digital presence, from your website to your public meeting and agenda management process for accessibility to non-English speakers. To provide equal access to public meetings for all your residents, be sure to create bilingual or multilingual versions of your content to upload separately from the English versions.

The viability of a multipronged platform approach to reach hidden populations.

There's an indelible link between technology and access to government. And while there are disparities related to access to technology by underserved communities almost everyone has a cellphone. According to Pew Research Center, 100% of people between the ages of 18 to 49 have a mobile phone and most of those people prefer to interact through text (SMS) as opposed to email. While text is a highly effective way to reach all people, regardless of their socioeconomic status, it is a particularly effective tool for connecting with hard-to-reach populations without a physical address or those who move frequently. Pew Research Center also noted that younger adults, lower-income Americans, and those with a high school education or less rely on smartphones for online access, proving that government services that are accessible online are especially beneficial to underserved groups. As stipulated in the executive order mentioned above, the customer interface is important too; make sure it's user-friendly and easy to navigate so, parties who visit your site can easily access the information or services they are seeking.

Reaching people who are difficult to reach requires dedicated intention and strategy. That's how Indiana's Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA) approached connecting difficult-to-reach families in need to life-saving funding and resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using Granicus technology and consulting services from the Granicus Experience Group, FSSA developed a unified family experience even during a time of crisis. FSSA built sophisticated, automated email and text campaigns to enable communications around enrollment in programs that provide early childhood care, education, and out-of-school support. They were able to send timely information in a rapidly changing environment to their target audience: families who might not update their current residence information in a timely manner.

Underserved communities often include shift workers, hourly employees, and those who rely on public transportation, circumstances that make in-person visits and even phone calls difficult to accomplish. Digital (often mobile) access to services and information through an easy-to-navigate, ADA accessible website removes the burden created by those limiting, often systemic barriers.

SORTA
Southwest Ohio Regional
Transit Authority

The Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority (SORTA) transformed the way it informed riders about route detours, delays, or interruptions by switching to SMS and email alerts powered by Granicus. Now, Cincinnatians who rely on public transportation get the information they need about the specific route they ride — delivered right to their phone.

"You can get a notification when your pizza delivery is on its way — why shouldn't you be able to know when your bus is running late? govDelivery made that possible for us."

— Dave Etienne, Director of Marketing & Communications for Metro (Southwest Ohio Regional Transit Authority)

GRANICUS

To reach all walks of life, including the underserved, a multichannel, platform approach is absolutely paramount. Every government organization needs smart online forms, workflows, and easy service fulfillment capabilities, an agile public meeting and agenda management solution, and a solution to manage public records requests. Of course, all these solutions should be accessible from an ADA accessible website designed for government, championed by a marketing and communications solution that can simultaneously disseminate information about your programs, initiatives, public meetings, and announcements through text messages, email, and social media.

But all that's essentially one-way communication. Most organizations drop the ball there, forgetting to solicit feedback from the people they serve. Leaders should strive to be in a perpetually open and honest conversation with their communities to create more connected communities. A comprehensive community engagement platform can promote inclusive, productive, sustained dialogue through a suite of purposeful engagement tools, robust communication options, and 24/7 moderation to complete the metaphoric two-way highway that should constitute healthy government relations.

If you would like to learn more about how to use Granicus solutions to reach underserved communities, reach out to **schedule a demo!**