Federal Agencies Now Have New Web Design Guidelines

GSA Technology Transformation Services says the guidelines encourage 'iterative, modular' website modernization.

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Photo courtesy of the General Services Administration

In accordance with federal law, all government agencies are required to modernize their websites to ensure that public websites’ user experience meets if not exceeds the expectations of the people each agency serves. To make modernization easier, the General Services Administration developed the U.S. Web Design System (USWDS) as a standardized platform for agencies to design modern websites.
That team Wednesday released a set of guidelines encouraging agencies to “use the U.S. Web Design System (USWDS) maturity model to deliver a great digital experience,” from the USWDS design principles down to the product’s code.

GSA is “getting rid of the concept that each agency [designs] on a one-off basis,” said Anil Cheriyan, director and deputy commissioner of GSA Technology Transformation Services, during a press call.

Cheriyan further underscored that agencies should not view these guidelines through a compliance lens, but think of them as “flexible, modular and baked into the DNA of design.” The end goal is to ensure every federal agency delivers the first-rate experience that users now expect from both public and private websites, as well as offering a helping hand for agencies to follow both the spirit and the letter of the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act (IDEA).

21st Century IDEA, signed into law December 2018, requires agencies to meet the following eight requirements, as reiterated in a GSA press release issued Jan. 22:

1. Accessible: be accessible to individuals with disabilities in accordance with Section 508
2. Consistent: have a consistent appearance
3. Authoritative: not overlap with or duplicate existing websites
4. Searchable: contain a search function
5. Secure: be provided through a secure connection
6. User-centered: be designed around user needs with data-driven analysis
7. Customizable: provide an option for a more customized digital experience
8. Mobile-friendly: be functional and usable on mobile devices

USDWS 2.0 provides a more efficient design experience for all agencies modernizing their websites in accordance with 21st Century IDEA, improved through user feedback, interviews with project teams, and comments and recommendations made on the product’s documents on GitHub. The USDWS team encourages agencies to “report problems or bugs, contribute new research or guidance [and] propose new components” through GitHub as the platform evolves.

The new guidelines are “built to support a modern, iterative, agile … user-centered design,” said Dan Williams, USWDS product lead.
The guidelines are also designed to give “incremental” adoption and adaptation guidance, providing components, design tokens, utilities and page templates to agencies to design both the front-end and back-end of their sites.

Williams compared the guidelines to the rules in baseball. “No two games are the same,” he said, but the rules cover each game while being flexible for a variety of situations.

The USWDS team added that several agencies have already used USDWS’ maturity model to design their websites, lauding CIO.gov, usda.gov and AmberAlert.gov as three exemplars of the guidelines.

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