



# Accessibility Outreach Initiative (AOI) Forum 2020 Summary

During the 8th Annual Accessibility Outreach Initiative (AOI) Forum, CTIA virtually hosted industry leaders, policymakers, and representatives from the accessibility community. The Forum celebrated key wireless milestones for people with disabilities, and explored how the wireless industry is continuing to serve the needs of the accessibility community.



## Featured Speakers

Keynote remarks were delivered by CTIA President and CEO Meredith Attwell Baker, U.S. Senator Ed Markey, and FCC Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau (CGB) Chief Patrick Webre. Panelists from across the accessibility community and wireless industry discussed an array of topics, including the Communications and Video Accessibility Act (CVAA), keeping Americans connected during COVID-19, and updates from the Hearing Aid Compatibility (HAC) Task Force.

Senator  
Ed Markey

“These issues are about participation and each of us should have the ability to participate in society to the greatest extent that our talents and abilities permit. That’s why as society evolves, our protections for individuals with disabilities must evolve as well.”

Meredith  
Attwell  
Baker  
(CTIA)

“Wireless has become a central part of daily life for those with disabilities, helping to break down historic communications barriers. We’ve made great strides to empower millions of people with disabilities, and I’m excited to see what we can do together in a more accessible 5G future for all.”

Patrick  
Webre  
(FCC)

“Expanding access to wireless technologies for people with disabilities is an issue of great importance [...] At the FCC, we are continually looking to build on the progress we have made over the last ten years.”



## Key Takeaways

### Panel 1: The Tenth Anniversary of the CVAA

#### Moderator: Matthew Gerst, CTIA

Moderator Matthew Gerst kicked off the CVAA anniversary panel with an overview of key themes from the CVAA. He noted that, from the wireless industry perspective, one of the biggest themes from the CVAA's passing was flexibility, which allowed companies to determine how best to facilitate the goals that Congress set out in the CVAA. And in [this year's report](#), the FCC found that significant improvements in the accessibility and usability of covered products and services have been made and there has been a continued effort by the affected industries to include people with disabilities in the design and development of their products and services.

#### Susan Mazrui, AT&T

Susan Mazrui highlighted how the CVAA has influenced the way companies are thinking about technology and how accessibility is now much more top-of-mind than before the CVAA. As changes are made to wireless networks, what we see now is how technology is ubiquitous in our daily lives. Not only are companies thinking through ways to make things accessible, but also providing access to the device technology and network service that can support it.

Today, many people have an Alexa or Google Home product in their home with access to household appliances—and now we have the emergence of smart cities. All of this now affects every aspect of daily life for all consumers, not just consumers with disabilities. We will continue to see more overlap of what started out solely addressing ease-of-use and what continues to evolve over time.

#### Karen Peltz Strauss, Accessibility Legal Consultant

Karen Peltz Strauss reflected on how the accessibility community was successful in getting several strong laws enacted in the 1980s and 1990s, including the Hearing and Compatibility Act, closed captioning, and relay services. As technology and communications transitioned toward Internet Protocol in the 2000s, the community faced a new challenge of ensuring future digital developments and wireless service were equally accessible. Earlier statutes were unable to keep up with the sophisticated advancements in wireless, digital, and internet-based innovations, even as communications on wireless devices became indispensable for the accessibility community.

Customization and personalization has changed everything. Now, more companies are making sure accessibility is built in during the product development and design stages. For consumers, this means there is no longer a wait until the final products come out, which had happened many times in the past. Wireless device advances spurred by the CVAA include hands-free device settings, innovations in mapping technologies, computerized tasks that assist individuals with vision loss, even lawn mower settings that operate autonomously.

In addition to the many substantial improvements in accessibility driven by the CVAA over the past ten years, the emergence of COVID-19 last year led to companies increasing video calling capabilities, which has helped the deaf community.



### **Paul Schroeder, American Printing House for the Blind**

Paul Schroeder reiterated that the gap in accessibility access existed when smartphones came about in 2008, but noted that there was an extensive amount of assistive technology work in progress at the time.

In the wireless industry, the advent of apps gave consumers the ability to personalize their services, but there needed to be more work done in terms of access for the accessibility community. The American Printing House for the Blind built a navigation system on top of the wireless industry framework to allow people who are blind to know where they are at any point in a building, which is challenging especially in airports. AIRA is a company that leveraged the phone as a video access device so that an individual who is blind can utilize a smartphone camera in a room and receive real-time visual information through the camera. For navigation inside interior spaces, GPS has been crucial for all of us. Now we are able to have similar kinds of accessibility in large difficult-to-navigate interior spaces.

Mr. Schroeder stated that he suspects there are going to be similar opportunities that come from 5G high-bandwidth low latency connectivity. 5G would mean so much for the accessibility community to know they have ubiquitous and low-latency connectivity for video interpretation and visual information.

### **Tom Wlodkowski, Comcast**

Tom Wlodkowski noted that when the Blackberry came out, before the CVAA, there was a concern about cell phone accessibility. Consumers were trying to find ways to navigate and latch onto any solution they could to try and drive it forward. Companies started to think about how assistive technology works from an operational standpoint and a scalable manner moving forward.

The biggest change Mr. Wlodkowski observed is that accessibility has now become a technical and business imperative if you want to be a credible company in the telecom space.

Whether you're a wireless company, cable company, or internet edge company, you have to think about accessibility in a holistic way. Automated captioning solutions are being worked on for iPhones and Androids. Full-length TV programs are repurposed for online viewing. And, as Ms. Peltz Strauss said, viewing happens via a smartphone or tablet. If you want to be a credible company in this space, you have to focus on accessibility.

## **Panel 2: Keeping Americans Connected During COVID-19**

### **Moderator: Harry Anastopoulos, CTIA**

Moderator Harry Anastopoulos discussed how voice traffic increased from 20% to 40% on wireless networks. Nearly 80% of voice connections are wireless. Major providers also saw a 25% increase in texting. COVID-19 also drove significant increases in wireless broadband demand with data traffic up nearly 20%. Wireless has been essential in adapting to life under COVID-19.

### **Shellie Blakeney, T-Mobile**

Shellie Blakeney highlighted how T-Mobile immediately activated its emergency response plans and expanded capacity across the nation by deploying spectrum on loan from the FCC. T-Mobile was a huge supporter of the FCC's Keep Americans Connected Initiative, which focused on consumers who were financially affected by the pandemic. T-Mobile adjusted and expanded specific hot spot data options and launched [T-Mobile Connect](#), which is one of the lowest priced smartphone plans to date. T-Mobile also



collaborated with their education partners to provide connectivity and affordable distance learning solutions.

Digital literacy is imperative. It is critical to make sure that information about various options—for service, network, and platform—translate in a manner that is easily understood.

### **Zachary Bastian, Verizon**

Mr. Bastian spoke about the learning initiative and how the company worked on structuring network delivery and policy programming to respond to COVID-19 concerns. This was the route of a new distance learning initiative, which has connected educators and 30 million students across 40 states with 4G LTE connectivity, mobile device management tools, and a cybersecurity suite. To learn more, go to [www.verizon.com/distancelearning](http://www.verizon.com/distancelearning).

Throughout the pandemic, Verizon has aimed to center focus on people with disabilities and elevate their voices. AAPD released a study indicating that services, such as Medicare and Medicaid services and other services that people with disabilities rely on, will become virtualized through telehealth platforms even after the pandemic. But if those platforms are not accessible, then we're missing an opportunity to do right by people with disabilities and risk disenfranchising them even further. We need to concentrate on the accessibility services during COVID to ensure they are accessible post-COVID-19.

### **Dr. Shea Tanis, Coleman Institute for Cognitive Disabilities**

Dr. Shea Tanis explained that deaths due to COVID are 3-8 times higher for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities than the general public. Families have adapted to the pandemic because of the tremendous response of the wireless industry. Our aim is to ensure that solutions are accessible and familiar to the people with cognitive disabilities so that they do not lose out on these benefits.

The Coleman Institute worked with local partners to keep people with cognitive disabilities connected by providing accessible information even for those without their own access to phone or email. Things like remote support, virtual job coaching, health monitoring, and overall wireless communications are solutions that have a tremendous impact for people with cognitive accessibility needs.

Providers of accessibility services are going to collapse if they do not adapt to the virtual environment. Some of the major concerns for consumers are using up data plans if they require entirely virtual services for their connectivity needs. We also need to make sure the accessibility community does a better job of sharing what options are available thanks to wireless connectivity.

### **Debra Berlyn, Project GOAL**

Debra Berlyn discussed how technology has helped those 65 and older stay connected with their community and their loved ones, but there are still issues to address in terms of a digital divide made worse when the pandemic hit. When it comes to tech for older people, personal one-on-one contact is essential. Older individuals have been left on their own to manage their connection issues because of risk of COVID infection. Technicians have not been able to safely go into homes to set up devices or troubleshoot. If something goes wrong with their communication device, they are left without a working connection to address their issues they would otherwise have to address over the phone.

Thankfully, Ms. Berlyn observed that a lot of great applications have emerged during the pandemic that makes life easier for older Americans, like delivery apps and telehealth. We have to make sure they continue



to be accessible and affordable for older individuals.

### Panel 3: HAC Task Force Update

#### Moderator: Sarah Leggin, CTIA

Moderator Sarah Leggin discussed how the wireless industry has been focused on promoting HAC for years, offering more accessible devices and collaborating with the accessibility community toward positive outcomes. As part of these efforts, over a period of years, CTIA jointly with the Competitive Carriers Association and Telecommunications Industry Association worked with consumer advocates from the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA), Telecommunications for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Inc., and National Association of the Deaf to reach a consensus proposal on how best to continue increasing the availability of HAC handsets for those with hearing loss. That proposal recommended enhanced benchmarks for the percentage of HAC devices that manufacturers must offer, proposed formation of the HAC Task Force to study the feasibility of further changes to the benchmarks, and suggested additional steps the FCC should take to help ensure that people with hearing loss have full access to innovative handsets.

Now, key stakeholders from the wireless industry and the accessibility community have come together to make recommendations to the FCC regarding the feasibility of requiring 100 percent HAC compliance. Ms. Leggin welcomed leaders of this initiative representing industry and consumer perspectives to discuss the work and progress of the Task Force since its launch, and the next steps the group will explore as it drives toward a final recommendation that will encourage continued industry progress and benefit consumers with hearing accessibility needs.

#### James Craig, HAC Task Force Chair

James Craig explained that the HAC Task Force represents device manufacturers, voice service providers, and advocacy groups. Efforts of the Task Force that Mr. Craig highlighted were a summary of available and evolving HAC technologies, a survey that will be conducted over the course of the next year of how consumers, audiologists, and other hearing professionals are using HAC technologies, and an analysis of the potential impact of the new HAC standard on the work of the Task Force. Mr. Craig reported that the task force will continue research in 2021 to inform drafting of its final recommendation that will be submitted to the FCC by the end of 2022. Mr. Craig reflected that the biggest accomplishment during the pandemic was the improvement of technology for remote collaboration, such as video chat, and he looks forward to seeing continued innovations in wireless and accessibility.

#### Lise Hamlin, HLAA

Lise Hamlin noted that HLAA was actively involved in drafting the HAC consensus document alongside wireless industry representatives. She recalled that they collectively agreed that hearing aid compatibility for wireless headsets is the collective goal. She explained that the mission of the Task Force is to gather data and help determine whether the existing definition of HAC is the most effective means for ensuring access to wireless handsets, while also encouraging technological innovation. At 87% compliance today, she observed we are extremely close to achieving the goal of universal access for people with hearing loss seeking to use a wireless device with their hearing devices. In addition to the Task Force, HLAA is also looking at the current



state of the wireless technology to reach 100% accessibility. Ms. Hamlin looks forward to working together moving forward on the Task Force.

### Audience Questions

**Moderator: Kara Graves, CTIA**

Question: What can we do to mitigate issues that accessibility communities face when trying to adapt to virtual life during the pandemic?

- **Debra Berlyn, Project GOAL:** Virtual life will continue to be a challenge for the older community, but the best thing to do is for community organizations to work with industry to find the best solutions tailored to their constituents. She suggested a virtual genius bar to not only identify a particular company but to identify the best way to remotely instruct that particular accessibility community.
- **Dr. Shea Tanis, Coleman Institute:** Knowledge translation is important. Leveraging peer mentorship models so people can learn and use technologies and share what works for them, as well as strategies such as on-demand technical support that uses cognitive accessibility models of learning to be able to apply solutions.

### Closing Remarks

The Forum concluded with final remarks from CTIA Senior Vice President of External and State Affairs Jamie Hastings, who encouraged an ongoing discussion on how the wireless community can continue to serve the accessibility community in the years to come.

## Questions or Comments?

CTIA is committed to providing members and stakeholders from the accessibility community with a platform to discuss wireless accessibility policies. If you have questions or comments about this event, please reach out to Gabi Dunkley [[gdunkley@ctia.org](mailto:gdunkley@ctia.org)].