Dear ACCESS Board, I am writing to urge the ACCESS Board to expedite the refresh of Section 508 and Section 255. Technology has far exceeded the expectations of those who wrote the original regulations for these vital laws, and people with disabilities are truly suffering as a result. Over and over again, we hear the the federal government can provide much-needed employment for people with disabilities, and this is true. However, it is too often the case that a person with a disability goes to work for a federal agency only to discover that the software and hardware products he or shee needs to do the job are totally inaccessible.

This situation is particularly problematic for people who are blind and who must rely on screen-reading technology to access the content of their computer screens. In the best circumstances, scripts for screen readers can be written and applied to software products that were never intended to be accessible in the first place -- but developing scripts takes time and money, and supervisors whose interest is in seeing that the job gets done don't always find it easy to be patient while requests are made, scriptors located, dollars allocated, tests conducted -- meanwhile, work suffers -- and no one
-- including the person who is blind who cannot actually do the work independently -- is happy. Sometimes, federal agencies end up hiring two people to do the job of one, if that one is a person who cannot access the content of his or her computer screen independently. So, the federal employee who is blind ends his or her day feeling inadequate (knowing that if the software and hardware he or she is expected to utilize were accessible, he or she could easily accomplish the work, and knowing at the same time that in order to do the work, he or she must rely on a sighted "helper." In other cases, the person with the disability is either demoted or forced to leave the agency.

The situations I have described are not isolated instances. They are too often the status quo for too many federal employees with visual disabilities.

Section 508 has been around for 15 years. Numerous complaints have been filed, even more have not -- because of the real fear of retribution -- and yet, the problems of employees with disabilities persist, and as electronic and information technologies advance even further and faster, grow worse with every passing day.

As a trainer and curriculum developer, I work on contract for the Section 508 Office of the Department of Veterans' Affairs. I have developed courses to teach employees to use two popular screen readers, and along with a colleague, I provide custom training to blind and visually impaired employees who often need specialized scripts to utilize the products they need in order to accomplish the demands of their jobs. I hear, first-hand, every single day the frustration, often verging on desperation, in my custom trainees'
voices.

This is no way to run an agency or a government or a country -- professing on the one hand to care about people with disabilities and promising to lower the unbelievably high unemployment rate among this population -- while, on the other hand, asking people with disabilities to work with inaccessible software and hardware, jeopardizing their job security and their confidence in their own capabilities every single day.

A refresh with rules that can be enforced and a viable complaint process that eliminates the possibility of retribution against people who dare to complain, a reliable process for preventing the purchase of inaccessible technologies (with no self certification by the very perveyers of these products), an emphasis on testing of products and remediation by the companies who have sold them, and a real,

honest commitment to the principles of Section 508 and Section 255 are features of the coming refresh that I, and so many other people with disabilities, are hoping for with this refresh -- And no more delays!

Thank you.
Sincerely,
Penny Reeder
Montgomery Village, MD