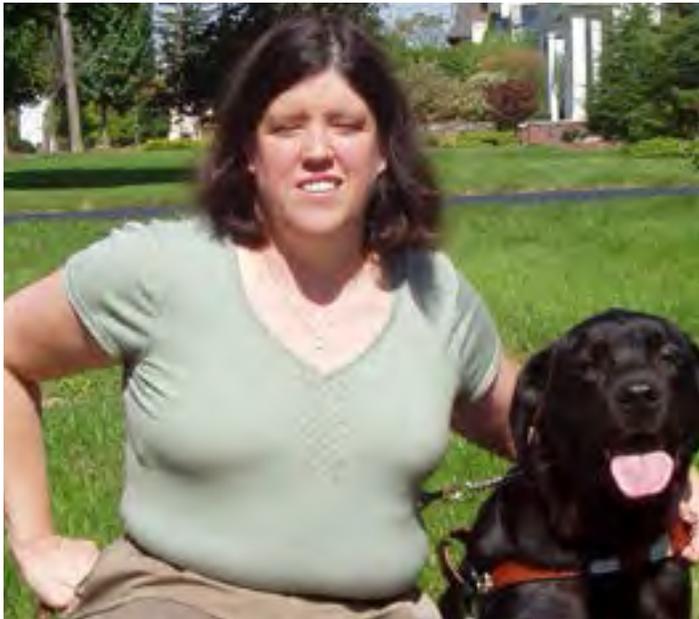


## Meet a Member of Our Staff

In our ongoing series to introduce you to our staff, we spoke with Mary Lou Mendez, a Management Analyst in the VHA Section 508 Office.



### Q: When did you come to VA?

I started my VA career in 1991 as the Visual Impairment Services Team (VIST) Coordinator at the Syracuse VA Medical Center (VAMC). As a part of VA's Blind Rehabilitation Service, VIST Coordinators are case managers supporting Veterans and active duty Servicemembers who are blind or have low vision. My duties included making referrals to VA Blind Rehabilitation Centers (BRCs), Visual Impairment Services Outpatient Rehabilitation (VISOR) programs, Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialists (BROS) and low vision clinics. My other responsibilities included providing counseling, education and referral to ensure that Veterans and active duty Servicemembers experiencing severe vision loss had access to available benefits and services.

Before coming to VA, I developed a computer access training program at a community agency, which offers services to people who are blind or visually impaired.

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### Q: What degrees do you hold?

I have a BA in English and Elementary Education from the State University of New York at Potsdam, and an MS in Rehabilitation Counseling from Syracuse University.

### Q: How did you get involved with accessibility and Section 508?

Working in a VAMC, I used a computer for just about every aspect of my job, including scheduling appointments, writing consults, entering progress notes, reading discharge summaries and ordering prosthetics. I used a screen reader to do all these things, so the accessibility of electronic information was important to me. If the information on my screen was not accessible, it could be really difficult, if not impossible, for me to get my work completed.

As I got to know Veterans with disabilities who were seeking services from VA, as well as other employees with disabilities working within VA, it became even clearer to me that accessibility is a crucial part of making electronic information technology available to the many people who need to use it.

So, I was delighted to accept a position as a management analyst in the VHA Section 508 Office in 2007. Since then I have had the opportunity to work closely with project teams and content creators,

helping them to ensure the accessibility of their products. I have also had the chance to coordinate the efforts of some very knowledgeable and creative folks on our team, who have developed a variety of training resources and other materials to help staff become more aware of Section 508 accessibility.

**Q: If you could give just one piece of advice about Section 508 accessibility, what would it be?**

Start early. It's usually much easier to build accessibility into a project from the beginning than it is to try and fit it in at the end.

**Q: What training resources are available on the VHA Section 508 website?**

There is a full-length course on testing web-based information and applications for Section 508 compliance, and another full-length course on testing software for Section 508 compliance. For Flash developers, we have an in-depth course on creating accessible Flash, and for people who create PDFs, we have a set of tutorials on how to make PDFs accessible. Visit our training resources page at [www.ehealth.va.gov/508](http://www.ehealth.va.gov/508) to see what we have to offer!



## Avoiding Section 508 Violations

Learn how to avoid these issues so your content will pass accessibility testing.

During the fourth quarter of fiscal year (FY) 2012, most of the violations our office helped remediate fell into two categories across media formats and one violation in Flash on its own: Reading Order for Flash, PowerPoint slides and PDF documents, color contrast for HTML and PDF, and ensuring graphics and objects in Flash provide textual information about their names, descriptions, roles, states and/or values.

### READING ORDER IN PDF DOCUMENTS

Reading order for Flash, PowerPoint and HTML are covered extensively in the [Fall 2012 issue](#) and this issue's Quick Tip, so we'll cover PDFs here and complete the set.

As with other formats, reading order refers to the order that Assistive Technology (AT), such as screen readers, speak information to the user as they move through the document. It should read items in an order that makes sense, such as reading headings before their related content, reading paragraphs in the correct order, and reading content that appears in columns correctly. AT should usually not read across both columns at once. It should read down the first column and then proceed to the next one.

Documents should be tagged to indicate reading order so that AT doesn't have to "guess" and in all likelihood read things incorrectly. To do this in Adobe Acrobat X:

- Open the Tags pane.
- Verify that all content is tagged properly—e.g., paragraphs, headings, tables, etc.
- Verify that the displayed order of the tags matches the visual and/or logical order of the content.
- If it does not, move the tags around to reflect the proper reading order, either via drag-and-drop or cut-and-paste.

More information on this topic is also available in the [Tagging for logical reading order section](#) of our PDF tutorials.

## COLOR CONTRAST

This accessibility violation makes a return to our top violations list, while still being easy to check and avoid. Providing good color contrast is useful to most users; however, it is especially useful for persons with a variety of visual impairments. Regardless of media type—HTML, PowerPoint, PDF, Word—applying the following guidelines is an easy way to ensure sufficient contrast in most cases.

- Text under 18-point requires a ratio of 4.5:1.
- Bold text under 18-point or text that is 18-point or greater requires a contrast ratio of 3:1.
- Use a color contrast checking tool such as one of the following:
  - [Color contrast checker from SSBBar](#)
  - [Contrast analyzer from the Paciello Group](#)
  - [Color contrast checker from WebAIM](#)

Follow these steps:

1. Open the page or document.
2. Use the tool to check that all text and meaningful images have contrast ratios within the appropriate range.

Note: Black and white text will pass and does not need to be tested.

## ENSURE THAT FLASH OBJECTS CONTAIN TEXTUAL NAMES, DESCRIPTIONS, ROLE, STATE AND VALUE

It is important that Flash objects have textual names and descriptions, and that the role, state and value of interactive objects are also made available for assistive technologies to identify and report such information to users. Without this information, Flash content will be inaccessible to AT users. Using standard components, such as standard checkboxes and radio buttons, will help ensure such information is accessible.

## WHAT DO THESE TERMS REFER TO?

An accessible name in Flash provides a text alternative for a Flash object. If the object contains text, the name should contain that text as well.

- Description contains additional information. Depending on the AT, the description will be read immediately after the name, on request, or not at all.
- Role is the type of control—checkbox, radio button, etc.
- State indicates the status of the control—a checkbox is checked, a radio button is selected, etc.
- Value describes what the control is about—a checkbox that says, “Yes, add me to your mailing list.”
- More information on this topic is available in our Creating Accessible Flash course under [Providing text equivalents](#), and [Providing accessible user interface controls](#).

## Quick Tip

### Web Page Reading Order and Simulated Dialogs

This quick tip is about reading order on web pages. Reading order refers to the order in which screen reading software presents a page to the user. Screen readers generally use the source file to determine the reading order. Screen readers cannot interpret positioning with styles, so the order that text and images appear in the source are the order they will be read to a user.

When the user activates a button or link which presents more information or opens a simulated dialog, that new information needs to be added in the source right after the link, not at the bottom of the file.

This can be tested by turning off style sheets, to see where things show up on the page by default.

## In His Own Words



Steve Baumgartner had his first experience with the VHA Section 508 office earlier this year. His course, Moving Forward, had its inauguration on Veterans Day 2012. This self-help course is innovative and media rich. Steve graciously agreed to answer a

few questions about his first experience working with our office.

### **Q: Please explain your position.**

I serve as a VA New Media Producer (1701) for Mental Health Services (MHS) as of January 2012. The MHS web services group uses internet and emerging technologies to support the delivery of evidence-based, recovery-oriented, mental health services to Veterans and their families. My duties as a Media Producer are varied but revolve primarily in two realms:

- Instructional Design
- Media Design and Services

Prior to joining the VA team, I served as an Instructional System Specialist (1750) as the Director of Satellite Education for the U.S. Army Safety Center.

### **Q: What project brought you to the VHA Section 508 office?**

MHS utilizes an Integrated Mental Health Strategy (IMHS) Implementation Plan (IP) to improve the access to care, quality, consistency, and implementation of innovative treatments and continuity of behavioral health. One of these Strategic Actions focuses on developing web-mediated resources for Veterans, Servicemembers and families across the Department of Defense (DoD) and VA. The first resources developed to meet the demands of the IP will be two self-help courses, which will be accessed via the Internet. These courses continue to be jointly developed by the VHA MHS and the National Center for Telehealth & Technology (T2), currently a component center of the Defense Center of Excellence (DCoE) for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).

The first of these courses that was submitted to the VHA Section 508 Office for review was a

problem solving course, titled “Moving Forward” ([www.startmovingforward.org](http://www.startmovingforward.org)). Moving Forward was officially released on Veterans Day 2012. It is a free, online educational and life-coaching program that will help individuals to better handle life’s challenges. It is designed to be especially helpful for Veterans, Military Servicemembers and their families. However, Moving Forward teaches skills that can be useful to anyone experiencing stress.

### **Q: Did you have previous experience making eLearning content accessible?**

Until I began service within VA my exposure and application of 508 guidelines had been very limited. Though I have been in the education forum for 30-plus years and was around for the inception of e-learning, those years were in a DoD capacity. This is not to say that DoD does not comply with 508, but that projects I was associated with at the time had limited exposure to the 508 guidelines.

### **Q: What were your preconceived assumptions about working with our office?**

If I were to say that I had trepidations starting off dealing with the VHA 508 Office, it would be an understatement. The rumors flow freely and here are a few that come to mind:

- If you make your course 508 compliant, it will make it boring.
- They will try and change the spirit of your course.
- They will hobble your course.
- It will add six months on to the production time of your course.
- They are unreasonable and inflexible.

In light of these accusations, I attempted to go forth with our engagement with an open mind and spirit.

### **Q: Did you use the online resources provided by the VHA Section 508 office?**

Yes, I have and they have been a tremendous asset. But what I have found as an even better asset is that all 508 staff I have encountered has been more than accommodating in answering any additional

questions that I have had. They have also been very quick to put me in contact with any subject matter experts if I needed any more specific information.

**Q: If so which ones were most helpful?**

To get a better basic foundational understanding, I found the Section 508 Starter Toolkit a very good read.

I also found the VHA Section 508 e-courses to be very instrumental as well.

**Q: What was your first-time experience working with our office?**

What can I say, my experience has been refreshing, engaging and educational. It has been close to six months now since my first engagement with the VHA

508 Office and I have nothing but praise for the office and those who work in it. From the initial contact, I made it clear that my working knowledge on 508 was limited at best. With those cards laid on the table, all 508 team members I encountered went out of their way to make sure I was pointed in the right direction and was provided the information on how to best meet the 508 standards. The submission and remediation process was very fast and painless, which I found even more amazing as we were approaching crunch time with a fast approaching end of the fiscal year. It is critical that we as educators embrace the 508 standards to help all organizations democratize training and give all employees access to education and development opportunities anywhere, anytime.

## Testing a Unified Group (TUG)

The VHA Section 508 Office wants to help you plan ahead. We have implemented a process to expedite the testing of large groups of courses. If you have a group of courses with the following characteristics your courses could be candidates for this testing method.

- Do your courses have a similar look and feel?
- Were they developed by the same development team?
- Are all of the courses ready to be tested at or near the same time?

If you have a group of courses that meet these criteria, here is how we will test them. One course will be chosen as the model or index course. Testing will be completed on that course. If the course contains any Section 508 violations, you will be invited to remediate the violations. Once you remediate the

model course and make similar corrections to the rest of your courses, notify us that the remediated model course and other courses are ready for testing. We will produce a remediation report for the model course and only one report for all of the remaining courses. The similar look and feel will allow us to test the courses more quickly and we will know what to look for based on the results of the testing of the model course. Please note: TUG cannot be easily applied to all media types. HTML and PowerPoint are the best candidates. For example, PDF and multimedia videos are generally so individually unique that this technique is difficult to apply to ensure all content is free of Section 508 violations.

Let us know if you think you have a group of courses that fit into this testing process. We'll be happy to assist you in submitting the courses to be tested using this expedited approach.

## Get Onboard!

It is now possible to be alerted when a new edition of the 508 XPress becomes available. Just visit <http://www.ehealth.va.gov/508/newsletter/> and activate the link to subscribe to our list.

Visit the VHA Section 508 Web site to review Section 508 checklists; training materials for developing accessible content in Flash, HTML, Word, PDF and PowerPoint; and to locate additional resources.

Internet: [www.ehealth.va.gov/508/](http://www.ehealth.va.gov/508/)

Intranet: [vaww.vista.med.va.gov/508workgroup/](http://vaww.vista.med.va.gov/508workgroup/) \*

*\*Links designated with an asterisk are available to VA internal users only.*