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Manitoba Accessibility Office
630-240 Graham Avenue
Winnipeg, MB R3C 0J7
Via email: MAO@gov.mb.ca

To Whom It May Concern,

On behalf of the Association of Manitoba Municipalities (AMM) which represents Manitoba's 137 municipalities and is a member of the Accessibility Advisory Council (AAC), I would like to take this opportunity to provide some comments regarding the accessibility regulation standard for Information and Communications in accordance with *The Accessibility for Manitobans Act (AMA)*.

Firstly, the AMM would like to reaffirm its support once again for a barrier-free Manitoba that is accessible and inclusive for all through proactive identification, removal and prevention of accessibility barriers. We also believe that accessible communication and information are important to ensure people with all abilities can participate in public life and contribute to the vibrancy of local communities.

Since 2011, the AMM has repeatedly voiced concerns over the lack of provincial funding to municipalities to support the effective implementation of accessibility standards. In fact, we have continuously made these concerns known to the AAC and Minister of Families as well as the independent reviewer of the Accessibility for Manitobans Act (AMA) legislation. As local communities cannot be expected to shoulder compliance costs and administrative burdens alone, we wish to thank the Province of Manitoba for announcing a new \$20-million endowment fund that will provide grants up to \$50,000 to municipalities and other organizations to eliminate accessibility barriers. Since the AMM supports greater accessibility for all Manitobans, this new endowment fund should significantly benefit local communities and their residents.

Moving forward, the AAC under the guidance of the Manitoba Accessibility Office (MAO) should continue to consider and provide analysis of the financial implications of their recommendations on stakeholders. Given the ongoing pandemic and significant financial pressures municipalities are facing, we urge the Province of Manitoba to continue providing adequate financial and resource support to help municipalities identify, prevent, and remove barriers to accessibility within their local communities.

For instance, regarding the proposed information and communications accessibility standard regulation specifically, Sections 7(1) and 8(1) would require the allocation of tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars to comply with accessible web content and applications. Based on municipal experiences in Ontario, the AMM is aware of cases in which municipalities have incurred costs greater than \$100,000 to re-format pre-existing web content and design new fully-accessible platforms to comply with provincial legislation. Considering evolving information and communications technology, specialized and highly-skilled trained staff are also required to operate ICT systems and manage documents. Given these realities and high costs, low rates of compliance are common throughout municipal Ontario due to unrealistic requirements and substantial financial burdens.

The AMM also understands that organizations in Ontario must currently adhere to WCAG 2.0 Level A criteria for all web content, evolving to WCAG 2.0 Level AA by 2021. The draft standard in Manitoba proposes organizations adhere to WCAG 2.1 Level AA criteria, which would lead to inconsistencies between the two jurisdictions. While we welcome Section 7(c) and 8(c) indicating that web content and application does not apply if it would result in undue hardship to the organization, it remains unclear what would be defined/and or eligible as “undue hardship.” Moreover, the proposed regulation does not provide clear direction for obligated organizations such as municipalities. Thus, more clarity and guidance are required to ensure municipalities are aware of circumstances that may not require updating web software, especially if implementing such standards pose a significant financial hardship.

In regard to Sections 13-14 concerning public libraries and educational institutions, the proposed standard lacks basic information about the potential impacts on budgets. For example, provincial funding for libraries has remained stagnant under the *Rural Library Operating Grant Program* since 2004. In effect, this 15-year stagnation has resulted in additional burdens as municipalities are addressing these financial shortfalls through greater municipal contributions to not cut programming available to residents. Therefore, if a person requests a library resource through a communication support or accessible format, it is vital that provincial funding and resource support is provided.

Lastly, it is vital that MAO continue to enhance communication and ensure any forthcoming resources are responsive to the needs of local communities. We appreciate the newly-created Manitoba Accessibility Compliance Secretariat for delivering a webinar to AMM members on May 20, 2021 regarding how the customer service standard and AMA legislation affects municipalities. As the next general municipal election takes places in 2022, it is vital that engagement sessions such as these continue to ensure a smooth transition as municipalities look to enhance accessibility in their communities moving forward. To guarantee effective compliance of accessibility standards, we encourage MAO to ensure resources and training are more readily



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accessible to local municipalities. Designing an accessible Manitoba involves collaborative municipal-provincial support, therefore it is essential that the AAC continue to streamline and adopt approaches that focus on education rather than sanctioning municipalities into compliance.

In closing, thank you for you for the opportunity to provide these comments. The AMM will continue to advocate for greater accessibility through reasonable standards and practical regulations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Denys Volkov", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Denys Volkov
Executive Director

cc: Honourable Rochelle Squires, Minister of Families
Heidi Wurmman, ADM Families