The National Museum of Women in the Arts will undertake a digital accessibility initiative to expand online access to people with disabilities. Working with expert accessibility partners, the museum will embed the use of universal design into digitally based activities and materials. The project team will conduct an accessibility audit of the museum’s digital spaces; complete remediation of inaccessible digital content; create new, fully accessible digital content; transcribe key additions to its archival holdings; and determine onsite digital accessibility needs for the museum’s reopening following a temporary closure for renovations. The public will have access to descriptive text on website images and accessible virtual programming. Activities also include in-depth training for staff on digital accessibility best practices. This collaborative museum-wide initiative will build the museum’s capacity in creating accessible digital content to meet the needs of users of all abilities.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the current Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program and project category to which you are applying.
DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY: EXPANDING OUR REACH

Narrative

PROJECT JUSTIFICATION

Project Goal
The National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA) is requesting $249,790 to expand digital accessibility across the museum for online users and visitors. Since 2019, NMWA’s Digital Engagement team has made online accessibility a critical priority, starting with the redesign of the museum’s website, nmwa.org, which launched in June 2020. During the pandemic, staff members enthusiastically embraced a digital-first approach, working on new initiatives, such as adding alternative text for the new website launch, specifically targeting images of artists and artworks, which are among the site’s most popular assets. As the digital needs for users have increased with the pandemic and the museum’s renovation closure (August 2021 through September 2023), greater online access has never been so vital. Online accessibility extends far beyond the museum’s website; this fall, the museum formed an interdepartmental Digital Accessibility Working Group to identify the museum’s needs and goals. Using the foundation set over the past few years, the museum is now at a crucial point where we can begin to make a real impact, pursue a more inclusive approach, and build capacity for ongoing access.

With the building’s first full renovation in more than 30 years, the museum’s physical location is temporarily closed to the public. The pandemic-related closures in 2020 and 2021 uncovered new ways for museum staff to connect with audiences online, initiatives that will continue after NMWA’s building reopens. In order to maximize our impact, we are creating an interdepartmental process that inspires, clarifies, and supports accessible working practices across the institution. This collaborative strategy will maximize access for online visitors and lay the groundwork for our broader accessibility efforts as the museum fulfills its commitment to delivering an experience that foregrounds diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion.

Our approach to online accessibility, specifically, is to remove barriers that prevent people with disabilities from interacting with and having equitable access to websites, digital tools, and technologies. While this is our primary audience for this grant, our aim is to provide all lifelong learners with a welcoming and inclusive digital experience. As the first major museum devoted to the creative work of women, NMWA was founded on the principles of inclusion and accessibility. Achieving broad digital accessibility will support us in exemplifying those principles more explicitly than ever.

Advancing Strategic Plan
In strategic planning for FY2022–2026, the museum identified four major priorities: vibrancy, visibility, loyalty, and sustainability. Accessibility serves as a touchstone between these priorities as well as the underlying current to NMWA’s three core values: champion, open, and fresh. Through this time period, we are an institution undergoing massive changes, evolving through the challenges of the pandemic and eagerly anticipating the possibilities presented by the building renovation and reopening. During this time of radical change, we know it is vital to increase our accessibility across platforms.

Addressing the Need
Digital accessibility ensures all users have equal access to the same information regardless of their disabilities, such as the following: visual (includes people who are blind, low-vision, colorblind), hearing (includes people who are deaf and hard of hearing), cognitive (includes people who have autism, attention deficit, or dyslexia), speech (includes people who are not able to speak), and motor (includes people who are not able to use a mouse). Many of these users rely on a variety of assistive technology tools to navigate digital content. Assistive technology is any item, piece of equipment, or product system that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities.¹

Examples include voice recognition programs, screen readers, adaptive keyboards and mice, and screen enlargement applications.

In order for assistive technologies to be usable and effective, digital content needs to be designed and developed in the right way. Unfortunately, according to the W3C Web Accessibility Initiative, “many sites and tools are developed with accessibility barriers that make them difficult or impossible for some people to use.” As an institution that values access, diversity, inclusion, and equity, NMWA commits to providing all online visitors with a welcoming and accessible digital experience. Guided by the standards set forth by the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 Level AA, museum staff are striving to create accessible digital content.

Accessibility should be integral to our institutional cultures, workflows, and services. This year, staff members across the institution came together to form the museum’s Digital Accessibility Working Group. This group developed out of the need to collaborate to ensure a more cohesive approach to accessibility for our online users. In our initial meetings, we developed a vision document that outlines our goals and shared definitions of digital accessibility, criteria for success, roadblocks, stepping stones, projects, timeline, and internal structure. We determined that while closed, the need for expanding our accessible offerings is imperative as we move toward reopening our physical doors. Currently, we are building a digital strategy with an external consultant. This firm conducted online surveys that revealed our online reach to be notably large relative to our physical attendance. The data from the survey makes clear that even when our building reopens, we will continue to engage many users online.

Using Demographic Information & Relevant Data
The World Health Organization estimates that 15% of the world’s population, over 1 billion people, have a disability. As described in the World Report on Disability, “Disability is part of the human condition. Almost everyone will be temporarily or permanently impaired at some point in life, and those who survive to old age will experience increasing difficulties in functioning.” As noted in the United Nations’s “Policy Brief: A Disability-Inclusive Response to COVID-19,” people with disabilities have been among the hardest hit by the pandemic, deepening pre-existing inequities associated with disability.

In identifying the need and scope of our project, we looked towards a universal design approach—that is, the creation of design services that can be accessed, understood, and used by anyone regardless of their ability. We reached out to accessibility experts in the field, including Prime Access Consulting (PAC), Institute for Human Centered Design (IHCD), and Access Smithsonian, for guidance on how to expand our reach and accessibility online. According to IHCD, “In a world in which we live 30 years longer than people did 100 years ago and survive illness and injury at record rates, most of us will experience at least periods of functional limitation in the course of our lives.... The goal is to eliminate disabling environments (physical, information, communication, social and policy environments) in favor of enabling ones for everyone.”

Identifying the Target Group
The primary audience for our digital accessibility efforts are online users and museum visitors with disabilities. Specifically, we are seeking to provide greater access for people who are blind, with low vision, deaf, with hearing impairment, with intellectual disabilities, and/or with physical impairment.

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We have been strategic in our partnerships for this project to be inclusive of experts from our target audience. Since 2019, we have partnered with PAC, a firm composed of technical specialists with disabilities, which has helped us shape the scope of this project. Additionally, we are excited to work directly with IHCD on this project. The IHCD User/Expert Lab is a database comprised of users and experts, ranging from adolescents to people in their 80s, who have developed expertise by means of their lived experience in dealing with the challenges of the environment due to a physical, sensory, or cognitive functional limitation. The User/Expert Lab will review the usability and accessibility of NMWA products, services, and new technologies.

**Identifying the Ultimate Beneficiaries**

Ultimately, our aim is to better serve all lifelong learners by establishing more accessible practices across the museum. Accessibility “refers to the design of products, devices, services, or environments to be usable by persons with or without disabilities.” According to IHCD, by taking a universal design mindset, we are creating “…a framework for the design of places, things, information, communication and policy that focuses on the user, on the widest range of people operating in the widest range of situations without special or separate design.”

**PROJECT WORK PLAN**

**Project Activities**

In order to maximize impact, we will establish a broad base of accessible practices across the museum. During the grant period, we seek to accomplish the following project elements:

1. Conduct an accessibility audit for digital arenas that have not yet been assessed, including NMWA’s online shop, branding and design templates, and e-newsletter templates. Our online shop, shop.nmwa.org, is built on the Shopify e-commerce platform and has grown significantly, with record activity since the pandemic and the start of the building renovation. Accessibility experts will closely review the shop template and make recommendations to ensure there are no barriers when a customer wants to interact with the site. Additionally, the audit would review our online promotional and design materials, including logos, institutional PowerPoint templates, social media marketing designs, and e-newsletters. As part of the audit, we will work with accessibility partners, including the IHCD User/Expert Lab. After the audit report has been completed, staff will prioritize the work needed and our developer and designers will work with accessibility experts to implement changes and ensure compliance through year two of the grant.

2. Improve website accessibility, including continuing remediation of inaccessible digital content as well as the creation of new digital documents and content to be fully accessible according to WCAG 2.1 Level AA. Our redesigned museum website launched in June 2020 and is built on WordPress. We will begin by creating a comprehensive online accessibility statement to communicate the digital accessibility work that has been done to date and giving it prominent placement on the website. This section will allow users to report accessibility issues with ease, and a clear internal process will enable staff to respond quickly to accessibility complaints and concerns. We will also hold an in-depth training for technical staff and content creators during year one of the grant period in order to improve our skills in-house moving forward. Throughout remediation and content creation, we will work with accessibility technology experts to perform design reviews, spot checks, rechecks of remediation efforts, and general consulting. A top priority within our remediation backlog are the PDFs of the NMWA’s Library and Research Center’s 31 finding aids that assist researchers in finding information located in the museum’s renowned Archives of Women Artists.

3. Add alternative (alt) text to all images on the museum’s website. Alt text is a textual substitute for non-text content in web pages and provides visual descriptions of images to blind or low vision users. While we have begun adding alt text since the initial website launch in 2020, we have identified an estimated 350 images that

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need alt text. In her accessibility-focused role within NMWA’s staff, the museum’s Digital Engagement Assistant will study and share alt-text best practices. We will also add the alt text to our digital asset management system in order to ensure that alt text will be included in the metadata for future use. Additionally, we will make it a practice that all new images for online use (including the website and social media) must include alt text descriptions.

4. RemEDIATE the museum’s quarterly magazine document (circulation: 120,000) so visitors utilizing assistive technologies like screen readers can access and read the content. Since September 2021, we have begun to remEDIATE the PDFs (Portable Document Format) of the magazine so that it can be accessible for online reading. PDF remEDIation involves tagging PDF files to provide a hidden, structured representation of the PDF content that is presented to screen readers, establish a logical reading order, and supply visual descriptions of images through alt text. NMWA publishes a magazine four times a year, approximately March, June, September, and December. We will work with an accessibility partner to remEDIATE eight complete issues of the magazine over the two years of the grant period for inclusion on the museum’s website.

5. Make our YouTube channel videos more accessible by adding audio descriptions and captions. Audio descriptions of visual information provides content to people who are blind and others who cannot see the video adequately. These audible descriptions of the visual content of a presentation are synchronized with the existing sound track and are typically narrated during what would otherwise be natural silences in the presentation. Captions are text version of the speech and non-speech audio information needed to understand the content for deaf and hard-of-hearing users. They are synchronized with the audio and usually shown in a media player when users turn them on. After expanding her skills with caption clean-up and the creation of audio descriptions, NMWA’s Digital Engagement Assistant will add captions and audio descriptions to 20 videos, including remEDIATEion of existing videos on the channel and creation of new videos for the museum’s reopening. The videos will represent the institution, including recordings from the museum’s broad range of programming, our viral #5WomenArtists campaign videos, educational instruction, and animated illustrations.

6. Transcribe important recent additions to NMWA’s archival and library holdings. For this project, NMWA’s Library and Research Center (LRC) will transcribe six of its 30 archival collections pertaining to Frida Kahlo, Anita Steckel, Doris Lee, and three international festivals of women artists. Transcriptions are recordings of documents and ephemera that can be read, searched for, and used more accessibly.

NMWA holds letters written by the renowned Mexican artist Frida Kahlo to family and friends in The Nelleke Nix and Marianne Huber Collection: The Frida Kahlo Papers, which contains 369 letters, postcards, notes, clippings, printed matter, and drawings generated between 1930 and 1935. While a portion of the collection has been digitized, a significant subset has not, and none has been transcribed. Scholarly interest in this historic collection is exceptionally high, and transcription is essential for increasing the accessibility of this collection.

Another highly sought-after resource within NMWA’s LRC are the papers of Anita Steckel. In the 1960s, this New York City-based artist created works celebrating women’s sexuality, and she actively challenged societal norms in the face of legal and other challenges. Her repository at NMWA includes an estimated 8,750 pages of handwritten material and 1,500 pages of typed material. Transcription of Steckel’s handwritten material would enable NMWA to facilitate the introduction of Steckel and her work to a vastly larger audience, including students of gender studies and the history of New York City.

The Doris Lee Papers, 1896–1987 have proved to be of growing interest to curators and other scholars with an interest in American painting; this resource has supported an exhibition on the artist organized by the


Westmoreland Museum of American Art (touroping through 2023). Lee was a 20th-century artist who enjoyed success as a painter and illustrator. The collection consists of photographs, clippings, printed ephemera, sketches by the artist, source materials, textiles, and various documents related to all areas of the artist’s life. Material for transcription includes approximately 200 pages of handwritten material and 2,100 pages of typed material.

Lastly, NMWA holds archival collections from three international arts festivals presented concurrently with the United Nations Conferences on Women: International Festival of Women Artists, Copenhagen, Denmark (1980); Focus International, Nairobi, Kenya (1985); and Global Focus, Beijing, China (1995). While the majority of material is a visual archive of artworks, the documents that record the history of festival planning, implementation, and follow-up—often handwritten notes and records—remains undigitized and untranscribed. Transcribing and making these collections fully accessible would enrich scholars’ understanding of the UN’s long-term commitment to the empowerment of women, including global women artists.

The estimated 13,000 documents will be transcribed in-house by our Digital Engagement Assistant, trained and supervised by the LRC archives staff, using a transcription software such as FromThePage. After transcribing the collections, we will work with an accessibility partner, user experts, and web developers to add a selection of the archives to our website and to make the collections available for researchers.

7. **Offer accessible virtual public programs.** By training our programmatic staff across three departments (Public Programs, Education, and Membership), NMWA will set best practice procedures for holding accessible online programs for lifelong learners with clear guidance from Access Smithsonian, the central accessibility office for the Smithsonian Institution. The museum will offer 60 public programs with Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) captioning in year one while the museum is closed to the public. In year two, with the museum reopening, we anticipate a hybrid approach, presenting 30 online programs with CART captioning. CART captioning is professional speech-to-text, real-time captioning and provides for a more equitable, reliable, and accurate experience in comparison to automated live captioning. Additionally, we will ask participants to share their accessibility needs during registration and provide American Sign Language interpretation (and other accommodations) as requested throughout both years.

8. **Determine onsite digital accessibility needs for the museum’s reopening.** In anticipation of the museum reopening after the completion of the building renovation in late 2023, we will assess the needs for assistive technology and assistive listening requirements for live events and purchase equipment as needed. We will also work with a partner for guidance on the design, development, and mounting requirements for accessible digital signage across the museum building, which includes an estimated 25 screens throughout the building.\(^\text{12}\)

**Mitigating Risks**

The museum must work through potential organizational obstacles to accessibility. In order to create a strong base, NMWA must succinctly outline the path forward, identifying achievable priorities and tapping its rich tradition of resourcefulness to find the needed time and resources. Since this is largely a new project, staff development, including trainings, and external partnerships will be required to build organizational proficiency. Expanding digital accessibility efforts will depend not only on expertise, but also on a shift in organizational culture so that accessibility is part of the daily workflow across all of its departments and is codified in job descriptions, individual workplans, and in other relevant documents. The identified projects of this grant will establish baselines and foundational workflows to ensure sustainability. Additionally, there is an execution risk from a technical standpoint that the products will not meet accessibility compliance requirements. In order to mitigate this risk, we will work closely and consistently with accessibility specialists and users. We will also guide our work according to the WCAG 2.1 Level AA standards.

\(^{12}\)See Supportingdoc1 for proposed digital signage that will be reviewed for guidance on accessibility by consultants prior to the museum reopening.
Project Team
In order to build capacity across the museum, this project purposefully includes staff from several departments. Director of Digital Engagement Laura Hoffman will serve as the Project Director. In addition to overseeing the website, social media, and digital interactives at the museum, Hoffman co-leads the Digital Accessibility Working Group. Hoffman will manage the grant, working with internal staff, external stakeholders, and partners to execute each component of the digital accessibility project. She currently runs the working group with Digital Product Specialist Traci Christensen, who will serve as the technical lead throughout this project. As the technical lead, Christensen will work with accessibility technology experts to execute the remediation and addition of accessible features to the website. Taylor Morris, who currently works part time as the Digital Engagement Assistant on a temporary basis, will, with grant funding, become full time to serve as the Project Coordinator. In this role, Morris will collaborate closely with the Project Director and project leads to ensure timely implementation of all grant project components. She will also receive training to complete transcriptions, audio descriptions, and alt text descriptions. Each member of the Digital Accessibility Working Group will serve as a project lead for the components that correspond to their department.

Resources Needed
The execution of this project and continued commitment to accessibility throughout the museum requires institutional support, specifically staff time, buy-in, and support. With so many staff members involved, the museum must incorporate accessibility into its day-to-day workflows rather than consider it an “add-on.” To account for the staff time involved, the museum must commit $263,229.52 in matching funds to support the salaries, showcasing NMWA’s commitment to accessibility as part of job performance plans throughout the institution.

To build staff capacity, customized trainings will be part of the project, enabling a portion of the work to be completed in-house. In order to work effectively in-house, the current temporary Digital Engagement Assistant position will convert from part-time to full-time and become 100% dedicated to digital accessibility. This dedicated position will coordinate the many moving pieces cohesively. Additionally, we will need to outsource select technical components to maximize the expertise of various accessibility partners, including utilizing a user expert lab for review and feedback. We plan to work with the IHCD, WebAIM, and PAC as our technical accessibility specialists and for customized trainings. We have a demonstrated working partnership with PAC since 2019 and learned about IHCD and WebAIM from Access Smithsonian, who are our valued colleagues in the museum sector. We will continue to work with our web design and development firm, PRPL, in conjunction with our accessibility partners. For CART captioning, we will collaborate with Joyful Signing.13

Tracking Progress
We will routinely track and assess progress during our monthly Digital Accessibility Working Group meetings using a detailed working plan with benchmarks. This working group has set up a collaborative working space on SharePoint, utilizing this platform to assist in transparency and accountability throughout this grant period and beyond. During the monthly meetings, we will check in with each subgroup for status updates, allowing us to assess progress and make adjustments as needed. The Project Director has a proven track record for project management, particularly supervising complex grant-funded projects and achieving goals on time and on budget.

PROJECT RESULTS
Project Results Addressing the Need
The overall intended result is to offer accessible digital-based offerings and resources on the museum’s website and associated online platforms, bringing about greater inclusivity for the museum’s lifelong learners. This work will also align staff around unified accessibility work. Our central goal is to become a leader in digital accessibility in art museums and to serve as a model for sustainable accessibility work. The Digital Accessibility Working Group established a set of success criteria of intended results:

- Digital content is accessible for individuals with disabilities in accordance with WCAG 2.1, Level AA, extending our reach to underserved audiences.

13 See Supportingdoc2 for commitment letters from PAC and WebAIM.
• Internal stakeholders are committed to the museum’s digital accessibility vision and goals and actively engage in realizing these goals.
• There is a reduction in the number of outstanding accessibility issues and issues found in regular accessibility reviews.
• Staff content creators feel confident and supported in creating accessible digital content.
• All staff members have at least a foundational understanding of why and how digital accessibility is essential to our work.
• NMWA has a defined procedure for eliciting and responding to accessibility complaints and concerns, allowing for users to report accessibility issues with ease.
• NMWA has achieved all project goals, prioritized projects, and trainings outlined above.

Changing Knowledge, Skills, Behaviors, and Attitudes
We believe that knowledge will increase as a result of the project since a greater array of lifelong learners will be able to access the museum’s varied online offerings and unique resources. In turn, attitudes will change positively as participants experience directly NMWA’s commitment to delivering content with no barriers. We plan to work closely with the IHCD’s User/Expert Lab throughout the grant period in order to seek feedback from our target audience. We also anticipate that accessibility-related skills will improve among staff and behaviors will change as a result of this project, building greater capacity across the institution.

Resulting Products
The project will result in several tangible products:

• A detailed audit and resulting accessible templates for the online shop, design and promotional materials, and e-newsletters
• Training materials and documentation for digital accessibility best practices to be developed and used as a staff resource
• An online accessibility statement on the website
• Alt text descriptions for an estimated 350 images on the website
• Digital documents accessible on the website, including 8 issues of the magazine and 31 Library and Research Center finding aids
• Captions and audio descriptions for 20 videos on YouTube
• Transcriptions of 6 archival collections pertaining to Frida Kahlo, Anita Steckel, Doris Lee, and international festivals of women artists available on NMWA’s website
• CART captioning for 90 virtual public programs as well as ASL interpretation as requested on Zoom
• 25 digital information screens with accessible content and placement onsite in the newly renovated museum building (beginning in October 2023)

Sustainability
This project is about establishing a strong foundation. Accessibility is an ongoing initiative, but we believe this collaborative, ambitious approach across the institution will enable us to build capacity for the long term. The museum will devote staff resources to maintaining the Digital Accessibility Working Group, a highly motivated and energetic team that is vital to the promotion of interdepartmental skill sharing and joint accountability. The group also serves as a model for the museum’s larger continuing DEAI commitment. With the new workflows that incorporate accessibility set forth during this project, we will ensure that accessibility does not become an “add-on.” Moving forward, we will budget ongoing accessibility expenses across the departments for maximum impact.
### SCHEDULE OF COMPLETION: National Museum of Women in the Arts

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