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Program Title: Policies for Improving Accessible Web Development Techniques and Management

When examining web site accessibility for individuals with disabilities, it is important to address development from the premise that web sites should be aesthetically pleasing and usable – as well as accessible. By applying these criteria, developers are encouraged to work as teams, utilize comprehensive management techniques, and address the need for long-term maintenance. This approach ultimately results in a web development infrastructure that can handle both high demand, as well as change. In the case of the WIND Web Services Team this infrastructure takes the form of a “Development and Guidelines and Recommendations” document, core values conveyed to all Team Members, a quality checklist, constant discussion and collaboration, and an emphasis on documentation. However, the most important element of this infrastructure is the creation of a learning environment dedicated to accessibility and comprehensive quality development.

In July 1999, the Wyoming INstitute for Disabilities (WIND) launched the Connect Wyoming project. This interagency program was designed to provide Wyomingites with access to human services information through an interactive web site and database. The web site contains a variety of services implemented through several different techniques including: hand written HTML code and modification of purchased software. As the web

site evolved, the issue of “access for individuals with disabilities” was comprehensively addressed by the Institute. Using a set of guidelines established by the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) of the World Wide Web Consortium, the Connect Wyoming site was analyzed for components that would create access barriers for individuals with disabilities. This effort resulted in the formalization of a Web Services Team, the creation of a web development manual, and a set of values which guide the various web projects managed by the Institute. Since that time, the manual has guided the team’s efforts and served as a training tool for new members.

The document created by the Team covers several important areas of web development. Topics included are diverse but comprehensive. The idea was to cover the whole process of web development and just not a single component such as visual appearance. Because of this, the document was broken into five sections: web development issues, specific recommendations and guidelines for code creation and file structuring, an outline of the web design process, long-term maintenance issues, and a statement regarding future web development.

Mixed throughout the document was commentary about the values held by the Team. These values are as follows:

- Web sites should be accessible by everyone
- Whenever possible, use clean, standards-based code
- Work as a team and share ideas and problems
- Learning and teaching about quality web development is just as important as building web sites
- Design for long-term management

These values impact and guide all decisions when made creating web sites.

As new staff members join the Team, they are given copies of the WIND document, as well as the WAI guidelines. They are also provided a short orientation which covers basic disability awareness issues, a review of the projects and services managed by WIND, a review of the values held by the Team, and an introduction to the methods used to create web sites. After the initial introduction to the group, the new staff member is given simple project to begin working on and are encouraged to work with other Team Members to “get up to speed”. Although this approach is labor intensive at the outset, Team Members often begin to see the usefulness in the process oriented model. When staff members leave the organization, they are given an exit interview where they are asked to provide feedback about the development process, team setting, and overall management.

WIND currently manages nine distinct web sites through a Web Team consisting of four individuals: the Information Services Director, two web developers, and a graphics artist. Additionally, WIND has a Computer Information Specialist on staff who is responsible for maintaining the server containing the web sites. By using the various methods outlined above, the WIND Web Team has begun to gain a reputation for high quality and accessible sites, and hopes to continue to keep learning and improving its methods of web development