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The Home Appliance Accessibility Act

Digital technology has improved the ease and efficiency of the way we live our lives—but now blind people can no longer operate most fundamental home appliances.

Home appliance manufacturers are constantly incorporating advanced technology into their products. Most new stoves, dishwashers, washing machines, and other home appliances require interaction with digital displays, flat panels, touch screens, and other user interfaces that are inaccessible to people who are blind or have low vision. Knobs, buttons, and other tactile methods of use are disappearing.

Technology exists to make home appliances accessible to blind people. Manufacturers often claim nonvisual access cannot be achieved, but text-to-speech technology is inexpensive and more prevalent than it has ever been—Apple has incorporated VoiceOver (a text-to-speech function) into its touch-screen products, making the iPhone, iPod, and iPad fully accessible to blind people right out of the box. All ATMs manufactured in the United States are accessible, and every polling place provides a nonvisually accessible voting machine. Frequently, a simple audio output or vibrotactile feature can make a product fully accessible at minimal cost, as well as more dynamic and appealing for all users.

Unfortunately most manufacturers refuse to incorporate nonvisual access technology in their products. Companies claim that adding accessibility features is too expensive, but no public data demonstrate that claim. Furthermore, it is proven to be more cost effective to include accessibility features during the design phase rather than after, but manufacturers generally do not invest in this approach. Simply put, if companies include access technology in the design of home appliances, they will sell more products.

No laws exist to require companies to make home appliances accessible. Although the Americans with Disabilities Act and many other laws mandate physical accessibility for people with disabilities (e.g., wheelchair ramps, Braille in public buildings), no laws protect blind consumers' right to access to fundamental home appliances. This trend of inaccessibility will continue to grow as technology becomes more advanced and accessibility solutions are ignored.

The Home Appliance Accessibility Act:

Calls on the Access Board to conduct a study. The Access Board (a small government agency fully equipped with the resources to review the current marketplace, consult with stakeholders, and commission research on issues of access) will issue a report with findings and recommendations for a minimum nonvisual access standard for home appliances and at-home medical equipment.

Establishes a minimum nonvisual access standard for home appliances. Six months after the Access Board publishes the above-mentioned report, the Board will begin a rulemaking period, not to exceed 36 months, to establish a minimum nonvisual access standard for home appliances. The final standard will go into effect three years after the rule is finalized.

Gives the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) authority to enforce the standard. Having already been given consumer protection enforcement powers by Congress, the FTC will handle violations, conduct investigations, and levy civil penalties against manufacturers who fail to comply with the standard.

Provides flexibility to manufacturers. The legislation does not mandate a single, one-size-fits-all solution for all products. Additionally, manufacturers who can demonstrate that meeting a minimum nonvisual access standard creates an undue burden and companies with gross annual sales less than \$250,000 are exempt from the law.

END THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Sponsor the Home Appliance Accessibility Act

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