



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS, REGION I
5 POST OFFICE SQUARE, 8th FLOOR
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02109-3921

December 6, 2017

Acting President Kelly
c/o Katherine Schmeckpeper, Esq.
Sent via e-mail to kschmeckpeper@suffolk.edu

Re: Complaint No. 01-17-2242
Suffolk University

Dear Acting President:

This letter is to advise you of the outcome of the complaint that the U.S. Department of Education (Department), Office for Civil Rights (OCR) received against Suffolk University (the University) alleging disability discrimination. Specifically, the complaint alleged that certain of the University's webpages are not accessible to students and adults with disabilities, including vision impairments.

OCR is responsible for enforcing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), as amended, 29 U.S.C. § 794, and its implementing regulation at 34 C.F.R. Part 104, which prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability in programs and activities receiving financial assistance from the Department. The University is a recipient of financial assistance from the Department. Therefore, OCR has jurisdictional authority to investigate this complaint under Section 504.

Before OCR completed its investigation, the University expressed a willingness to resolve the complaint by taking the steps set out in the enclosed resolution agreement (Agreement). The following is a discussion of the relevant legal standards and information obtained by OCR during the investigation that informed the development of the Agreement.

Legal Standards

Section 504 prohibits individuals, on the basis of disability, from being excluded from participation in, being denied the benefits of, or otherwise being subjected to discrimination by recipients of Federal financial assistance. 34 C.F.R. § 104.4. Section 504 also prohibits affording individuals with disabilities an opportunity to participate in or benefit from aids, benefits, and services that is unequal to the opportunity afforded others. 34 C.F.R. § 104.4(b)(1)(ii). Similarly, individuals with disabilities must be provided with aids, benefits, or services that provide an equal opportunity to achieve the same result or the same level of achievement as others. 34 C.F.R. § 104.4(b)(2). An individual with a disability, or a class of individuals with disabilities, may be provided with a different or separate aid, benefit, or service only if doing so is necessary to ensure that the aid, benefit, or service is as effective as that provided to others. 34 C.F.R. § 104.4(b)(1)(iv). Programs, services, and activities—whether in a

“brick and mortar,” on-line, or other “virtual” context—must be operated in ways that comply with Section 504.

Factual Background

To date, OCR has investigated this complaint by reviewing information provided by the Complainant and conducting a preliminary assessment of the accessibility of several pages from the University’s website.

The complaint alleged that certain pages on the University’s website were not in compliance with Section 504 because they were inaccessible to individuals with certain disabilities, including, but not limited to, vision impairments. The Complainant used website accessibility checkers (PowerMapper and WAVE) and reported to OCR that the webpages listed above had accessibility issues for individuals with disabilities. The Complainant then provided OCR with a list of errors copied and pasted from the website accessibility checkers that she used.

Prior to the conclusion of OCR’s investigation and pursuant to Section 302 of OCR’s *Case Processing Manual*, the University expressed an interest in resolving this complaint. The University informed OCR that it was already in the process of rebuilding its website and selected a vendor based largely on the vendor’s experience with website accessibility. In the interim, the University had hired a Director of Online Content who will work to address accessibility issues. Subsequent discussions between OCR and the University resulted in the University signing the enclosed Agreement which, when fully implemented, will resolve the issues raised in the complaint. The terms of the Agreement are aligned with the complaint allegations and are consistent with the applicable laws and regulations. OCR will monitor the University’s implementation of the Agreement and continue to do so until it has determined that the University has complied with the terms of the Agreement. Failure to implement the Agreement could result in OCR reopening the complaint.

Conclusion

This concludes OCR’s investigation of the complaint. This letter should not be interpreted to address the University’s compliance with any other regulatory provision or to address any issues other than those addressed in this letter. This letter sets forth OCR’s determination in an individual OCR case. This letter is not a formal statement of OCR policy and should not be relied upon, cited, or construed as such. OCR’s formal policy statements are approved by a duly authorized OCR official and made available to the public. The Complainant may have the right to file a private suit in federal court whether or not OCR finds a violation.

Please be advised that the University must not harass, coerce, intimidate, discriminate, or otherwise retaliate against an individual because that individual asserts a right or privilege under a law enforced by OCR or files a complaint, testifies, assists, or participates in a proceeding under a law enforced by OCR. If this happens, the individual may file a retaliation complaint with OCR.

Under the Freedom of Information Act, it may be necessary to release this document and related correspondence and records upon request. If OCR receives such a request, we will seek to protect personally identifiable information that could reasonably be expected to constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy if released, to the extent provided by law.

If you have any questions, you may contact Civil Rights Investigator Molly O'Halloran at (617) 289-0058 or by e-mail at Molly.O'Halloran@ed.gov.

Sincerely,

/s/

Meena Morey Chandra w/p AMM
Acting Regional Director

Enclosure