

An Open Letter on the Future of the U.S. Web Design System

To GSA leadership and members of Congress responsible for oversight of federal digital services

USWDS is critical, and critically endangered, public infrastructure

The U.S. Web Design System (USWDS) provides common building blocks for federal, state, and local government websites. These blocks are then used by technical teams to build thousands of websites. USWDS helps web teams with compliance and consistency, providing Section 508 accessible, performant, and secure code. USWDS is shared government infrastructure.

According to GSA's public analytics, the code powers more than **one billion page views** per month on federal websites alone. Conservatively, USWDS saves the government [millions of dollars](#) per year.

Today, USWDS and the thousands of websites it powers are in jeopardy. The USWDS Lead was recently placed on administrative leave, the core team was disbanded, and community contributors (including agency partners) were removed with **no warning and no plan**. In their place, a political appointee was installed alongside a new government employee on detail from another agency. They are bypassing standard operating procedures by deleting public comments and adding unauthorized and untested AI programs to auto-approve changes.

Maintaining USWDS requires a dedicated team and comprehensive testing

One accessibility defect, performance issue, or security vulnerability in USWDS can put thousands of systems at risk. Conversely, every problem identified, tested, and fixed centrally saves hundreds of government teams from having to independently discover and solve the same problem.

The USWDS team has historically treated this responsibility with the seriousness it deserves: every building block (“component”) offered by USWDS has undergone rigorous review.

Every component has been tested against Section 508 requirements and the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. Accessibility work has included automated testing and extensive manual testing by accessibility experts, with results [documented](#) at the component level and the product’s Accessibility Conformance Report. Components continued to be evaluated when changes were made, new standards were released, or the team’s understanding of user needs evolved.

Transparency and open source collaboration make USWDS trusted and effective

USWDS was built by, with, and for people who understand the requirements of government digital services. Agencies adopting USWDS need to be able to trust what they are adopting; everything they use and build must be conformant. When evidence showed components were no longer meeting the needs of government teams, or posed risk, the USWDS team made changes — even recommended retiring established components — and communicated those changes.

While USWDS is housed in GSA, the community has provided a wealth of expertise. As important public digital infrastructure, USWDS has always been a project created in the open (“open source”), supported across government and the private sector by:

- Federal employees
- Contractors
- Civic technologists
- Accessibility experts
- Designers, engineers, and content specialists
- Other public contributors

Because USWDS is open source, the people actually building government services can see how the system works, identify problems, propose fixes, and contribute meaningful improvements that have national benefit.

The USWDS mission, vision, product values, design principles, and north star put the needs of government teams and their users at the center of product decisions. Its roadmap was developed with the community and vetted by OMB and Cloud.gov. Its contribution model, developed with CMS Open Source Program Office, explicitly gives community maintainers responsibility for guiding development, maintaining quality standards, supporting releases, and helping ensure that USWDS continues to meet its legal responsibilities.

That community took years to build. It's part of the infrastructure, too.

GSA decisions put critical infrastructure at risk

Anne Petersen, USWDS's federal product lead and its sole full-time staff member (since DOGE cuts in spring of 2025) was placed on administrative leave and replaced. GSA has shifted the USWDS staffing to intra-agency and political employees who **lack experience in delivering government digital services, the USWDS system, or in managing projects with significant legal, compliance, and usability concerns at a national scale**. At approximately the same time, USWDS open source contribution access was revoked for established community maintainers and contributors.

Agencies operating critical systems across public services need USWDS to be developed with transparency and continuity. Unfortunately, the above changes occurred without any notice to

the maintainers affected or to the broader community of government teams and organizations that depend on USWDS.

GSA leadership changed the people responsible for maintaining USWDS without publicly explaining how its established accessibility testing, quality assurance, release management, and community contribution processes will continue. This leaves delivery teams unable to trust that the system will meet user needs or legal requirements.

For agencies and delivery teams, trust in USWDS has always meant more than trusting that the code runs. It means trusting that accessibility testing happened, that changes were reviewed by people who understand the downstream consequences, that issues raised by government teams would reach people familiar with the environments in which USWDS operates, and that releases followed established engineering and quality-assurance practices.

The community of practitioners have trusted they would be listened to when identifying problems, contributing fixes, challenging assumptions, ultimately improving the system.

When accessibility and compliance expertise disappears, community maintainers lose access, and established quality-assurance processes are disrupted without clear communication, agencies are left with a difficult question: *Can we continue to treat USWDS as trusted government infrastructure?* Given the removal of experienced community maintainers and user comments from public discussions, we believe the answer, currently, is no.

GSA has the ability to restore that trust.

Former USWDS maintainers and contributors, former federal digital service staff, accessibility specialists, and practitioners from organizations that implement USWDS every day have the knowledge and capacity to help maintain the system. Many of us want to contribute precisely because we understand how important USWDS is to the government services we build and support.

We are asking GSA and USWDS leadership to preserve that capacity by taking these seven actions:

1. Restore appropriate repository access to established community maintainers.
2. Restore former federal leads and staff.
3. Preserve transparent contribution and review processes.
4. Maintain rigorous manual accessibility testing and documented quality assurance.
5. Communicate openly with the agencies and practitioners who depend on USWDS.
6. Ensure all deliverables are in compliance with federal regulations and laws.
7. Work with the existing open source community on a sustainable path forward for USWDS.

USWDS has never been the work of one person, one administration, one contractor, or even one agency. It is the accumulated work of a dedicated and passionate community that has spent more than a decade learning how to build better digital services for the public, together.

We are still here, and we're ready to help.

Signed,

The USWDS community

Abigail Fisher, civic service designer

Alan Brouillette, CTO, Illinois State Treasurer's Office

Alder Rhodes, web developer and accessibility specialist

Amanda Kennedy, former 18F service designer

Amy Leadem, Accessibility engineer

Andrew Do, designer and OPEIU 153 rank-and-file member

Anita Cheng, former 18F content strategist

Ash Weaver, software engineer

Beth DeConinck, Accessibility Specialist

Brandon Lenz, Software Engineer

Casey Watts, Staff Software Engineer (front-end, accessibility, design systems), former USCIS

Chris Mather, Product Manager, former 18F

Chris Pimlott, Software Engineer, former USDS

Christian Crumlish, ODI, 18F, Design in Product

Christine Bath, Senior Designer, Former 18F Product Design Manager

Christopher Whitaker, Executive Director, Alliance of Civic Technologists

Colin O'Sullivan, Software Engineer

Cyd Harrell, former chief of staff, 18F

David Cuthbert, Engineering Director

David Luetger, UX Designer, former 18F

Davida Marion, Software Engineer

Dannel Jurado, Senior Software Engineer, union steward

Ellie Hirth, Digital Service Designer

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Sarah Rudder, USWDS contributor from 2021-2026, fmr [Cloud.gov](https://cloud.gov) UX lead
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