

Filing a Complaint with the State Board of Dental Examiners:

A state-by-state comparison of the online complaint-filing process and potential barriers to individual reporting

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BACKGROUND

Despite the high ethical and professional standards to which dentists are held, adverse events still occur in the dental environment. Each State's Board of Dental Examiners (SBDE) has systems in place for reporting these incidents when they happen, but these systems vary widely from state to state and are often cumbersome to navigate.

Anecdotally, many dentists are unfamiliar with the specifics of when, where, or how to report adverse events to their own SBDE. It then stands to reason that patients with no dental background may be at a further disadvantage when attempting to find and navigate the complaint filing process provided by their state.

To preserve the reputation of the profession and maintain the trust of the community, barriers to incident reporting must be identified and corrected so that adverse dental events can be addressed in a timely and appropriate manner.

METHODS

Each of the 51 State Dental Board web pages were individually accessed and navigated and data was collected from each website regarding the availability and accessibility of an online complaint-filing system. This data was organized into four categories (**Fig. A**) related to the type, severity, and number of obstacles identified (**Fig. B**), and each state was assigned a letter grade (**Fig. C**) reflecting the relative ease or difficulty of navigating the system.

OBJECTIVE

The aim of this study was to provide a state-by-state examination and comparison of the State Dental Board websites for each of the fifty United States and the District of Columbia, in order to identify potential barriers to individual reporting through these systems.



Scan QR code for more information, including expanded data sets & a full list of State Dental Board websites.

RESULTS

Potential barriers to incident reporting were identified in all 51 of the websites we assessed. These barriers included issues with website **navigability** (78.4%), lack of clear **instructions** for complaint filing (31.4%), absent or inadequate accommodations such as **translation services** for non-English-speakers (70.6%) or **accessibility features** for individuals with disabilities (47.1%), and cumbersome requirements for **complaint submission** (43.1%).

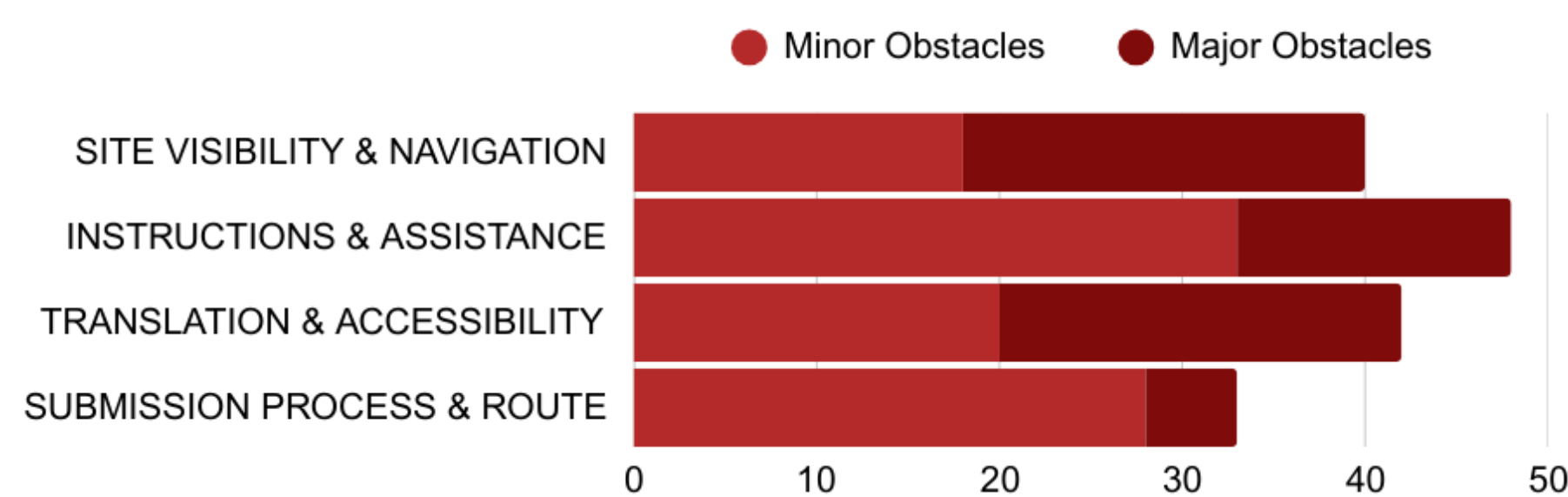


Figure A. Obstacles were organized into four categories. Values reflect the number of states impacted by minor (light) or major (dark) obstacles in each category.

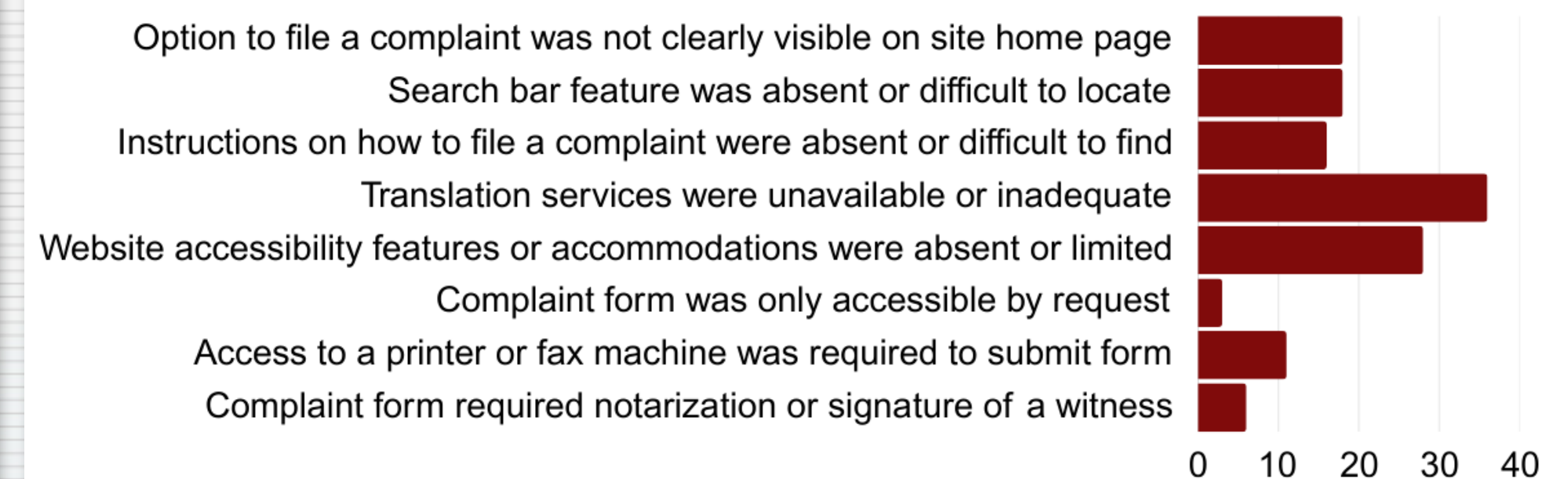


Figure B. Values reflect the total number of states in which each obstacle was identified.

DISCUSSION

The obstacles outlined in this study may dissuade patients from reporting to their SBDE directly, even when adverse events occur. While this may artificially reduce the number of complaints received by the SBDE, it does not ameliorate damage, restore trust, or prevent patients from airing grievances through other channels (e.g. online reviews, social media, word-of-mouth.)

Furthermore, the barriers identified are likely to have a disproportionately large and compounding effect on patients who are already vulnerable due to limited finances, illiteracy, recent immigration status, special needs, or other socioeconomic disadvantages. For example, a patient who cannot afford a printer may also lack the transportation required to access a notary public; a patient who requires translation services may have difficulty filing a complaint if the PDF form is only available in English, etc.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Each state has an **opportunity to improve** its complaint filing systems and should strive to **identify and reduce obstacles** where possible.
2. **Additional research is needed** to determine if the accessibility of complaint-filing systems has a **statistically significant** impact on the nature, frequency, or distribution of complaints received across the U.S.

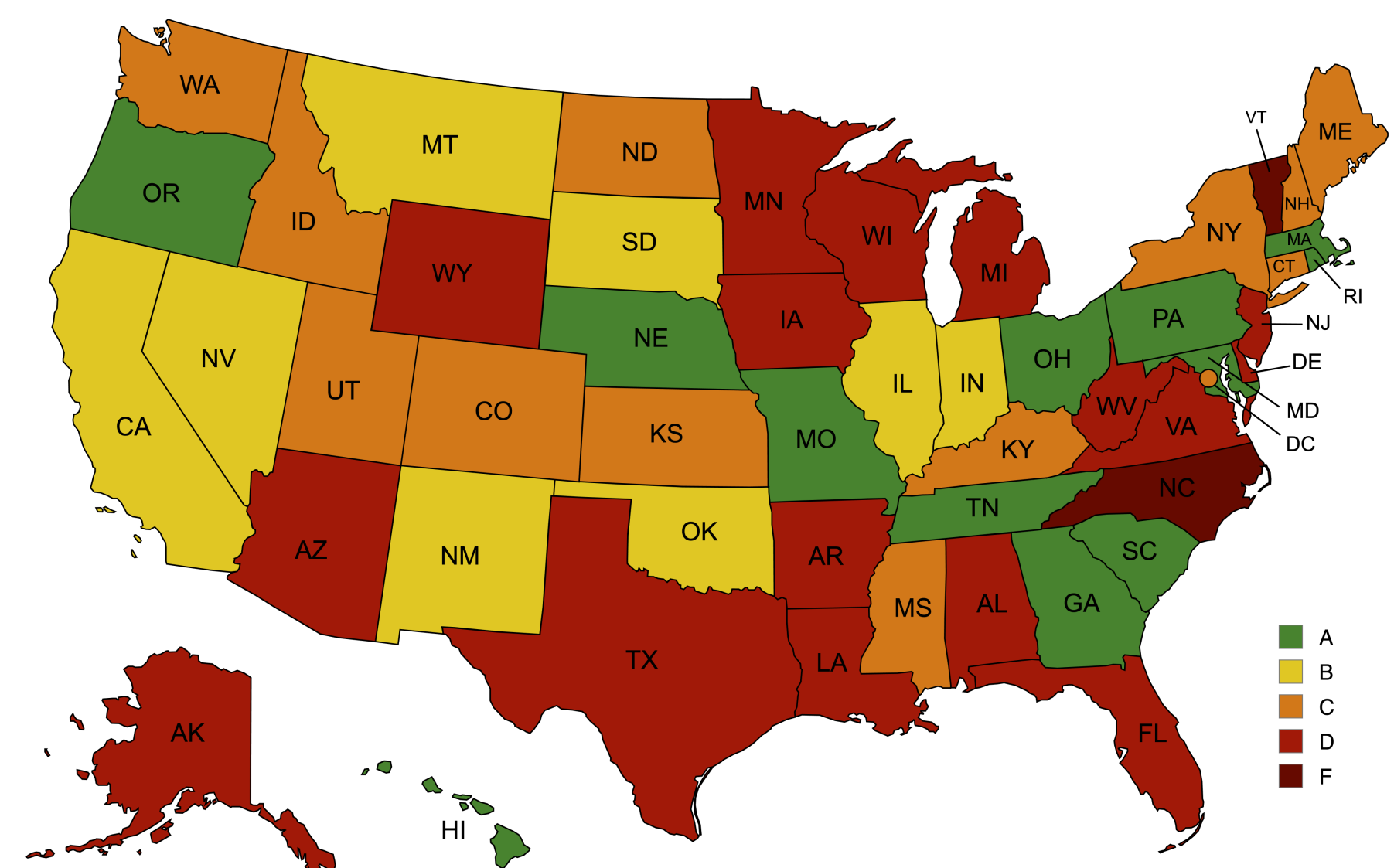


Figure C. States were assigned a letter grade to reflect the relative ease or difficulty of filing a complaint with the SBDE. Lower grades correspond to an increased number and/or severity of barriers to reporting.