

THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left

January 2026

Prairie Dog's Honor Roll for 2025

2025 was a dispiriting year in many respects, and 2026 is off to a grim start.

Nevertheless, honor lives among us:

- Hundreds of citizens spoke up about eminent domain, nitrate levels in Iowa's water, harassment of immigrants, and the corruption of the Trump administration
- Campaign volunteers knocked doors across the state to break the Republican lock in the Iowa legislature
- The Harkin Institute was certified as one of only two buildings in the country to achieve advanced universal design
- The Iowa Trans Mutual Aid Fund and other groups raised money for Iowans needing gender-affirming care

Below are just a few of the many Iowans who live by the words of Patti Smith's song, "the people have the power to redeem the work of fools."

The 168-year-old **State Historical Society** in Iowa City (SHSI) is required by state law to be located in Iowa City. When Iowa's Department of Administrative Services (DAS), led by self-

proclaimed "faith guy" Adam Steen, abruptly announced its closing, **Mary Bennett** sprang into action. Calling on her fifty years as an SHSI archivist, Bennett rebutted every DAS claim and mobilized a vast network of historians, donors, educators, and ancestry buffs in a ferocious fight to keep it open. Attorney Jim Larew assisted Bennett in throwing sand into the state gears by winning an injunction to stall the moving of materials from Iowa City to Des Moines. Others standing up for the SHSI and against the state's arbitrary and disingenuous actions include state legislators, Meskwaki Nation members, and the Iowa Federation of Labor.

Did we mention **Jim Larew** a minute ago? In addition to going to bat for SHSI, he co-founded Driftless Water Defenders (*Prairie Progressive*, January 2025), which currently represents a Winneshiek County couple trying to stop construction of a biodigester on their land. Somehow Larew has also found time to challenge the state's attempt to force Story, Blackhawk, and Johnson counties to create districts to elect County Supervisors, ending the at-large system employed by every other Iowa county: "The right to vote has been burdened, has been suppressed...by stripping citizens of

their rights in those three counties only."

Rachel Zimmermann Smith

When a skid loader operator was killed in an accident at Hawkeye Waste Management, the Johnson County Attorney was appalled to learn the company didn't maintain worker compensation insurance, leaving the man's wife with a \$185,000 bill for medical expenses. Zimmermann charged the owner and managers with a Class D felony and urged other county attorneys to be vigilant in discovering and prosecuting companies that profit by failing to protect their workers' families from financial ruin. Hawkeye Waste Management has since purchased insurance (*Prairie Progressive*, September 2025). In addition to protecting workers, Zimmerman Smith and the County Sheriff created and have maintained a pretrial GPS monitoring program to reduce the jail population and allow people to keep their jobs, education, and treatment while awaiting trial. She has also worked with the Domestic Violence Intervention Program to implement a county-wide domestic abuse risk assessment and to hold drop-in hours for victim-survivors who have questions about cases, no-contact orders, and how to access DVIP services.

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The stakes could not be higher

I want to start by saying there may be an incoherence or sense of disarray to this column. Hailing down upon America right now is a storm of lawlessness, incivility, aggression and menace so unheard of as to create in every one of us a paralyzing cognitive dissonance. This is the effect of things happening every day that simply cannot be.

We hear of people being grabbed while filling their tanks with gas by men in masks who leap from unmarked SUVs to simply whisk them away. The actions are totally opaque. The only witnesses to this have no way to determine where they might have been taken or even, in some cases, who they may have been. We see people shot in suburban neighborhoods, surrounded by dogs and kids and toys. It occurs with little indication of escalation. We see a woman in an askew SUV on the street, waving these agents on, several cars passing by her, until suddenly one of the masked men pulls a gun, leans into her window, three shots are fired, and she's dead as her car barrels forward into parked vehicles on the street.

We don't have a language for any of this—not here, not in America. We don't have a mode from which to comprehend the sudden removal of our personal safety and right to occupy a space in our own neighborhoods. No one announced we had lost the right to question or yell at intruders in masks who appear to be disturbing the peace on our streets. But it seems we have lost such rights, and we are being taken away. We are being shot near our homes. Incoherence and disarray in our thinking, given that, seems a reasonable response. But time is short. We have to grab hold and get thinking. How do we respond to these accelerating events?

Given human nature and egregious government thuggery, certain responses now appear inevitable. Some will act in anger, attempting to physically stop street actions by the men from ICE as they act to pick up persons allegedly in the U.S. illegally. Others will work to stage more formal protests. Still others will write letters, make phone calls, and exert pressure on elected officials and corporate entities to cut off support to this administration's lawless policies.

But as we each calculate our response we must remember: the opacity, the nightmare quality to the snatchings, and the suddenness of the descent of ICE into our cities is intentional. It's meant to do one thing: sow chaos. That chaos is intended to create tensions and fissures within communities. The goal is to further entrench opposition between those on far ends of the political spectrum and to neutralize or paralyze the vast middle. We mustn't help them in this effort.

Calculus, as a form of human reasoning, occurs across all human endeavors. Political calculus, it must be said, has given rise to many of the problems we currently face, yet it has rarely been more important. Everything now is poised in a most delicate way. It's important not to sway the majority into paralysis but to give them the room they need to become, and remain, moved to action by the removal of rights our government has undertaken. We lose a majority if we barricade neighborhoods, create constant escalations with law enforcement (however rogue), and work to make them feel more insecure than the government currently does. We need to focus as much on cohesion as we possibly can. That means, in the face of even the most outrageous incursions on our rights and personal safety, all must remain civil and

thoughtful. We must exercise all our freedoms as if they still existed, but deliberately, judiciously, in ways designed to convince the greatest number of our fellow citizens to join us in all forms of civil organized protest.

This is no plea from some political Miss Manners. The stakes could not be higher. The enemies of liberty could not be more cunning or ruthless. They will try to pick us apart thread by thread. It's already begun, and to date, they are doing pretty well. As we consider our own moves in the months ahead, let's remain aware of not only our near political and social alliances, but the greater fabric that holds all of us together in a full diversity of opinion and belief. Our strength lies there. Every self-indulgent calling of names, every destructive act justified by anger, serves only the aims of a mad president and his hideous array of minions. We must set aside our first response to fascism for the better one, the more difficult and measured one. That is the response they fear, for they know it will bring them down.

— *Kim Painter is the Johnson County Recorder.*

However much
you deny the
truth, the truth
goes on existing.

—*George Orwell*

What do you have to fear?

I recently bought a mini action dash camera from Menard's for \$6.99.

The camera not only has a windshield mount, but also a clothing clip so I can wear it like a police officer's bodycam. It has a high-resolution HD 1080p video with 8 GB card. Granted, it doesn't have audio, but it has ninety minutes of rechargeable battery life.

As technology advances, law enforcement agencies seek innovative methods of utilizing newfound technology in the name of public safety. However, any legislative proposal that would change public access to the information acquired through those methods are met with strong opposition.

Twenty years ago, "In dicta from an Iowa Supreme Court decision from 2006, [State v. Hajtic](#), the late Justice Jerry Larson (father of current Chief Justice Susan Christensen), speaking for a unanimous Court stated: 'We believe electronic recording, particularly videotaping, of custodial interrogations should be encouraged, and we take this opportunity to do so.'"

"Most jurisdictions in the United States now record interrogations, including all federal law enforcement agencies, thirty states, and the District of Columbia." But not Iowa. The time for change is in 2026.

The Iowa Bar Association met with many stakeholders in 2009 to discuss the issue of electronically-recorded custodial interrogations. Although most stakeholders "support recording in principle," concerns about the cost of implementation were expressed by several participants. Today, cost is no longer a legitimate concern.

A former legislator once explained Moore's Law to me. "Moore's Law is the observation that the number of

transistors on a microchip doubles approximately every two years, leading to increased computing power and decreased costs."

Not only is the cost of recording equipment decreasing, but practically every law enforcement officer in Iowa wears a bodycam. Currently, Iowa has no law regulating the use of body cameras on law enforcement officers. According to a 2025 article by the Iowa Newspaper Association, "Erin Jordan, of The (Cedar Rapids) Gazette, and Jared Strong, of the Carroll Times Herald, found many of the [local] policies were outdated—some still mentioned videotape—and inconsistent. About half did not acknowledge police video as a public record."

A legislative measure that sets minimum standards for body cameras should be enacted, and it should include the use of bodycams in interviewing suspects in custody. Fancy equipment used by Hollywood directors is not necessary.

Randy Evans, executive director at Iowa of Freedom of Information Council, contends that "police videos regularly are deemed to be open public records." That could be a factor in the fear that law enforcement, county attorneys and the Iowa Attorney General express in their opposition to supporting the recordings. "What do you have to fear" is a mantra that goes both ways.

Iowa Code section 22.7, subsection 5 is an exception to the Open Records law in which "officers' investigative reports" and privileged records are exempt from public disclosure "if that information is part of an **ongoing investigation**." At the present time, it appears as though investigations in Iowa seem to never cease. Language that makes custodial recordings accessible to defense attorneys should be a requirement for any legislative proposal.

Attempts in the past to amend section 5 of Chapter 22 have been met with strong resistance by a concerted effort of lobbyists representing police, sheriffs, and other agencies such as the Iowa Department of Public Safety and the Iowa Attorney General. For them, opposing any legislation changing the *status quo* is an affront to their ongoing need to be in control.

The last time a bill was considered that required the video and audio recording of custodial interrogations ([House Study Bill 572](#) in 2014), the bill was intended to be a compromise between advocates and opponents. Unfortunately, the powerful law enforcement community persuaded lawmakers that the bill was a "solution looking for a problem."

This year, House Republicans are preparing to prioritize a package they label "tough on crime." Yet, due process does not seem to be a part of their parcel. Including a provision on requiring the video and audio taping of custodial interviews should be seen as a necessary constitutional safeguard.

Government employees, local, state, or federal, have added protection in the form of the federal Bill of Rights. A government employee is provided due process of law, the right to confront witnesses, and all the other protections usually offered to criminal defendants. What you may not know, is that in Iowa, anyone with a law enforcement certification is provided with an additional set of protections, such as an "interview of an officer who is the subject of the complaint shall, at a minimum, be audio recorded." The "Officer's Bill of Rights," which is embedded in [section 80F.1](#) of the Iowa Code, should extend to all Iowans.

—Marty Ryan is a reformed lobbyist.

Iowa's Wildlife Action Plan needs action

To receive federal funding for wildlife programs, a state is required to prepare a wildlife action plan which outlines the steps needed to conserve wildlife and habitat before they become too rare and costly to restore. A wildlife action plan must be updated every 10 years.

A wildlife action plan must provide information on wildlife and wildlife habitat in the state and set out the actions necessary to conserve wildlife and habitat.

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources drafted the 2025 update of Iowa's Wildlife Action Plan. The Plan shapes how we protect wildlife, restore habitat, and ensure healthy ecosystems for the next decade in Iowa.

The 2025 Iowa Wildlife Action Plan does a very good job of describing the history and current status of Iowa's land and wildlife. It includes several important improvements. It adds new groups to the Species of Greatest Conservation Need. It also upgrades the land cover data used to map habitat, incorporates ten more years of monitoring data, reflects updated status of endangered species, and aligns the Plan with modern conservation frameworks.

Iowa is the most biologically altered state in the nation. Over the years, many species have become extinct in Iowa or are now in jeopardy. Habitat is greatly reduced—prairies, woodlands, and wetlands are only a fraction of what they once were. As the Iowa Legislature said in 1989, in the preamble to the Resource Enhancement and Protection Act, "The state of Iowa has lost ninety-nine and nine-tenths percent of its prairies, ninety-eight percent of its wetlands, eighty percent of its woodlands, fifty percent of its topsoil,

and more than one hundred species of wildlife since settlement in the early 1800s."

Iowa's Wildlife Action Plan states that its goal is that "Iowa will have healthy ecosystems that incorporate diverse, native habitats capable of sustaining viable wildlife populations" by 2030. To accomplish this goal, the Wildlife Action Plan describes numerous concepts.

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The Plan describes strategies for protecting wildlife and habitats. These include identifying important habitats and devising a plan to protect, restore, and reconstruct suitably large areas for habitat and wildlife corridors. The Plan also encourages efforts to work with landowners and state and federal conservation agencies to acquire more public land and to create and preserve habitat on private lands.

The Iowa Chapter of the Sierra Club supports these updates and appreciates the Plan's thorough description of Iowa's wildlife, their habitats, and broad conservation strategies. But the Plan still falls short in one key area: it does not grapple with the real-world challenges that prevent progress.

For decades, the Iowa legislature has debated reducing the DNR's ability to protect or expand public land, even though Iowa has one of the lowest amounts of public habitat in the nation. Likewise, many private landowners face economic pressures or concerns about property rights that

make adding habitat difficult. Without addressing these political and social barriers, including the need for better funding, stronger partnerships, and broader engagement with agricultural and landowner organizations, the Plan risks remaining a vision, rather than a roadmap. To create real change, we must put action into the Wildlife Action Plan.

One of the most important actions all of us can take is to contact our legislators and ask them to:

- Fully fund the DNR, particularly the Natural Resource Division.
- Encourage and ensure that the Wildlife Action Plan is followed by the DNR.
- Fully fund the Resource Enhancement and Protection program at \$20 million.
- Implement the Natural Resources Trust Fund by raising the 3/8 cent sales tax that is "for the purposes of protecting and enhancing water quality and natural areas in this State, including parks, trails, and fish and wildlife habitat, and conserving agricultural soils in this State."

All of us should care about Iowa's natural heritage.

—Pam Mackey Taylor is the Director of the Iowa Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Affordability

There's a lot of talk these days about affordability. It's important for household budgets, and it's equally important for the state budget.

Want to restore Iowa's commitment to PK-12 education, to state universities and community colleges? Want to enforce safety in workplaces and environmental quality? Hoping for stronger initiatives in mental health and health care access? Want to make sure nutrition assistance reaches all eligible Iowans?

As things stand in Iowa, we cannot afford it.

It's a choice our state's leaders have made not just for today, but for years to come. Sustainability of these traditional responsibilities is simply not the focus of Governor Kim Reynolds and the Republican leadership of the Legislature.

Lots of numbers show it. For starters, keep three numbers in mind:

- \$9.4 billion. That's the current state budget.
- \$1.3 billion. That's how short we fall of making the budget with current revenues.
- \$328 million. That's how much state money we're diverting to private school systems through Reynolds' voucher program.

Those numbers are for this year, but they matter far beyond. They set the scene for the new legislative session, the new budget, and what is to come if our state continues on the path charted by the Republican governing trifecta now in its tenth year. This path makes traditional Iowa priorities

unsustainable—or, one might say, unaffordable.

We can afford a \$9.4 billion budget this year only because legislators can patch the hole in it—for now.

They deliberately created and banked surpluses by cutting or holding down investments below inflation in education and other services, at the same time revenues held strong. Federal support in pandemic recovery offered a temporary boost to the Iowa economy and revenues, and lawmakers used it as a smokescreen.

The surpluses are one-time money while the tax cuts are permanent, and the surpluses are quickly vanishing.

They cut taxes—big time. Their own fiscal analysts told them the tax cuts they passed in 2022 and 2024 would be a \$2 billion hit to revenues by this budget year.

But they were crafty, as this year shows. Faced with a \$1.3 billion gap between falling revenues and ongoing spending, they bridged it with banked surplus money. That obscures the real fiscal picture because the surpluses are one-time money while the tax cuts are permanent, and the surpluses are quickly vanishing. Projected at \$2.2 billion just a year ago, the FY 2027 surplus is now projected at about a quarter of that—\$546 million.

What they avoid is what's next. What drops when the surpluses are gone? Is it the 2% per-pupil funding growth we've averaged for the last 15 years, when educators have sought 4% or

5% to meet needs? Will it be Medicaid services we decide we can no longer afford? Will it be SNAP benefits the federal government is forcing states to take on while at the same time cutting back their administrative support? Will we ever adequately regulate, monitor, and enforce standards for water quality? Who will pay increased prison costs as lawmakers debate tougher sentencing?

The simple truth is that with tax cuts, revenues fall, and that's a permanent cycle unless reversed, which Iowa's current leaders are not willing to do. In fact, some aim to assure it with constitutional amendments that may reach the ballot next fall.

Our leaders in both parties need to be upfront with their constituents now about the problem and the solutions, which—yes—involve restoring and restructuring a progressive income-tax rate structure for individuals and corporations, curtailing corporate tax loopholes, and decoupling from several Trump-era federal tax changes that target benefits to the wealthy.

If the political willingness were there, we could afford first-rate education that offers opportunity for our young people and attracts forward-thinking businesses to our state. We could afford clean water and good health care.

We could afford to do this right. The question really is, can we afford not to?

—Mike Owen of West Branch recently retired as deputy director of Common Good Iowa. He remains engaged in analysis of Iowa's fiscal picture, and of the Chicago Cubs' fortunes, for which he is more optimistic.

The reality of our porous borders

There is a great deal of activity by citizens and legal groups to resist and stop the egregious actions of the Trump administration.

I recently attended a vigil sponsored by California's Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity at the immigration court in Concord, California. Vigils also occur regularly at the two immigration courts in San Francisco. The purpose of the vigils is to be a peaceful presence on days that immigration courts are in session. We bring visibility to the attacks on immigrants who, per the law, must show up for check-ins at courts on regularly scheduled dates. We provide snacks and drinks for individuals and families attending court or waiting for family members when they go in to court. Children are offered small toys. Signs are carried and displayed, expressing support for immigrants and information about connecting with legal help.

It's not always possible for volunteers or even family members to accompany immigrants to their hearings, but every court has a trained volunteer "Observer" who attends hearings and makes notes about each case. Sometimes immigrants are taken directly from the court to detention centers, unable to tell anyone what has happened. Vigil participants act as allies to families and give information about how to locate the detainee as well as referral for legal assistance.

Even people who are following the laws to become legal citizens and those seeking asylum have been taken, without the completion of the legal steps required, and detained and/or deported without due process of the law.

Following our vigil outside the Concord immigration court, the Observer reported to our small group. She said that the judge had instructions to speedily move cases along. The judge requested that immigrants bring all of the documentation of their immigration process to court at hearings to be scheduled by the end of January (less than 2 months from the date of that day's court). The Observer also told us that immigrants were being

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deported directly from courts to third-country removals. This is a recent practice, now being questioned in higher courts, where migrants are sent to countries other than their country of origin. People seeking citizenship who were born in Africa might be sent to Mexico, or those from Mexico might be deported to South Sudan, Rwanda, or Uganda.

The goal of third-country removals is to strike fear in people that they could be sent to a country with a completely unfamiliar language and culture as well as possible political instability. The Department of Homeland Security has a web site devoted to immigrants who want to voluntarily return to their country of origin. They have a multi-million-dollar ad campaign to urge immigrants to self-deport, including an app that makes the process easy. People considering this option are offered a \$1000 Exit Bonus to help pay for the trip back. This sort of emotional, psychological terrorism is what immigrants—and their families—who have been living

here for sometimes thirty years are facing. These people may be working their way through the path to citizenship, or they have generations-long roots in this country, with jobs, homes, children, and grandchildren who may never have even visited the family's country of origin.

Immigration court judges have recently been fired for resisting the orders of the Trump Administration. These are law-abiding jurists who have been patiently helping people navigate the legal road to citizenship or asylum status. Many of these judges have deep connections to the community and agencies that work with immigrant communities. After firing several San Francisco immigration court judges, the federal government is already proposing the closure of some of the busiest courts.

Anyone who has lived in California or other border states knows the reality of our porous borders. We have co-workers, neighbors, friends, and our children's friends who may have missed steps in the legal process for officially becoming citizens. It's been the California culture for many years. Today we have all immigrants being vilified and called criminals. What needs to change are the ways our immigration policies are developed and enforced. What's happening to immigrants today is a travesty to the ideals of our country. The rapidity, the lawlessness, and the violence with which this Administration's new policies are being inflicted upon our nation's immigrants is intolerable in a democracy?

—*Francie Hornstein of Oakland, CA, grew up in Omaha.*

Cont'd from Page 1 Prairie Dog's Honor Roll for 2025

Bill Gerhard, inducted into the Johnson County Democrats' Hall of Fame last year, isn't resting on his laurels. The long-time labor leader continues to lure topnotch speakers to the Dems' Legacy Leadership Club (i.e. Tom Harkin, Art Cullen, Rekha Basu, Ty Rushing, Howard Dean), now in its fourth year. He initiated and coordinated five statewide performances of *Clarence Darrow*, a one-man play about the legendary civil rights lawyer and America's continuous struggle for democracy and justice. He worked with the Iowa Labor History Society to sponsor free movies at FilmScene in Iowa City on May Day and Labor Day. Gerhard serves on the board of the University of Iowa Labor Center, which he helped save when its existence was threatened.

Dream City was a dream that came true in 2025. **Fred Newell** had long imagined a place to nurture and mentor under-served young people and potential entrepreneurs. When Iowa City awarded his nonprofit \$3,000,000 of ARPA funds, Newell wasted no time in renovating an old building that now includes commercial spaces for new businesses, a full-service kitchen,

an auditorium, meeting rooms, and even a men's barber shop.

Starbucks baristas in Iowa City have been a model of commitment and persistence, going on strike and picketing in front of their stores in frigid weather. Though not as successful as the union organizing by **UnityPoint Health nurses** in Des Moines, they're making Starbucks management nervous and are inspiring workers across the country.

Satanic Temple of Iowa Mortimer Adramelech and his merry band of Satanists continue to be a thorn in the side of Iowa's bureaucracy, exposing governmental hypocrisy and ignorance of the Constitution at every turn. They've angered the Governor's office simply by trying to exercise the same rights that other churches have, such as hosting a Christmas display at the State Capitol (twice denied by the Department of Administrative Services). Iowa's top leadership looks more and more like a nest of Christian Nationalists masquerading as public officials.

—*Prairie Dog*



Jan 19
Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Jan 20, 1981
Iranian hostages were freed

Feb 2
Iowa precinct caucuses

February 3
Protect IPERS Day
Iowa State Capitol

Feb 5
Manufactured Home Residents' Day, Iowa State Capitol

Feb 24, 1991
Ground war began in Iraq

Mar 8
International Women's Day

Mar 19
Johnson Co Dems Legacy Club
Speaker: Matt Russell, former
Iowa Farm Service Agency
State Director
Info: wm.gerhard@gmail.com

Social Security's future under grave threat

For nearly 100 years, Social Security has provided life-sustaining economic security to millions of Iowa families. But without corrective action by Congress, the program will no longer be able to pay full benefits starting in 2033. Instead, beneficiaries will receive only 77% of what they are entitled to and what they depend on. Moreover, actions by the Trump Administration will likely mean the benefit cuts will come sooner, as early as 2030.

In Iowa 701,239 people—including children, people with disabilities, and 547,000 retirees—rely on their monthly Social Security checks; over 20% of Iowans receive benefits. With an average monthly benefit of \$1,865, the program contributes \$1.3 billion per month to Iowans. The impending 23% cut would represent a loss of \$3.6 billion annually to the Iowa economy. Social Security has lifted 260,000 Iowans out of poverty.

While the situation appears dire, a number of measures could be taken to ensure that benefits continue at the full level. One would be to ensure that high income earners contribute a larger share of their earnings. However, with each year policy makers delay reform, options grow fewer and abrupt cuts to benefits become more likely. Americans deserve and need time to adjust to any changes that might come.

— *Joe Bolkcom and Peter Fisher.*

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