

Welcome!

Virtual Legislative Open House 2026

Our goal today:

Learn more about the issues affecting Iowans with disabilities and what policy changes could make an impact.





The Iowa Developmental Disabilities Council will work to create change **with** and for persons with developmental disabilities so they can live, and work, learn and play in the community of their choosing

Today's Agenda

Overview of Public Policy Priorities

Wendy Andersen, Public Policy Committee Chair

Carlyn Crowe, Public Policy Manager

1. Accessible Voting

Roger Erpelding and Helen, Des Moines

2. Community Living and Health Care

Stacy Ring, Council Bluffs

3. Education

William Loyd, UI REACH, Iowa City

4. Employment

Zach Mecham, Pleasantville & Alex Watters, Sioux City

Legislators' Comments

Q & A

Employment

GOAL

Iowans with disabilities hold competitive jobs.

Iowans with disabilities want to work and be financially independent! But barriers exist that force them to make impossible choices between employment and getting the support

and care they need to live and work in the community. To keep the health care insurance and long-term supports they need through Medicaid, a person's income and assets are capped.

These limitations force people with disabilities to live in poverty, limit the hours they work, avoid marriage, and rely on public assistance programs, thus limiting her potential.

CALLS TO ACTION

Implement **Employment First** policies that prioritize **competitive, integrated employment** for Iowans with disabilities who access publicly funded programs.

Remove Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) income and asset limits for employed persons with disabilities whose only option for health insurance and supports is Medicaid.

Exclude individual assets such as retirement accounts and 401(k), 403(b), 457, and 529 plans from asset limitations.

Allow individuals to pay a premium based on their annual income to maintain Medicaid services.

Provide tax incentives to companies that hire, provide transportation to work, and allow work-from-home options for people with disabilities.

Fund vocational rehabilitation programs (IVRS and Department for the Blind) that focus on the transition to employment at the level that maximizes the federal match so that Iowa can invest in employing more people with disabilities.

Invest in the self-employment program through Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services (IVRS), as well as small business and workforce development programs that incentivize people with disabilities to start their own businesses.

Invest in rural broadband and high-speed internet infrastructure so that rural Iowans with disabilities can access employment programs and work from home.

Key Terms

Employment First

A national plan focused on the idea that everyone, including people with significant disabilities, can fully take part in regular jobs.

This plan encourages publicly funded systems to make sure their rules, policies, and payment methods support competitive integrated employment (CIE) as the main option when using public money for employment services for youth and adults with significant disabilities.

Source: U.S. Department of Labor

Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE)

Work that is performed on a full-time or part-time basis for which an individual is:

Paid at or above minimum wage and similar to the rate paid by the employer to employees without disabilities performing similar duties (and with similar training and experience).

Receiving the same level of benefits as those provided to other employees without disabilities in similar positions.

At a location where the employee interacts with other individuals without disabilities, and Offered opportunities for promotions similar to those of other employees without disabilities in similar positions.

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy

LIBBY SCHWERS URBANDALE

At 26, Libby Schwerts was working full-time as a graphic designer and running a side business making candles. Born with a rare disease that limits mobility over time, she remained on her parents' insurance to access necessary care. But managing her disability became too difficult with a rigid work schedule, so she left her job and started her own design business, allowing her to work on her terms.

After aging out of her parents' insurance, Medicaid became her only option for the care she needs, since private insurance wouldn't cover it. Medicaid limits how much money she can earn in her business, thus limiting her potential.

"I feel limited to reaching what I fully want to be. And not limited because of my disability. Limited in getting health care because I can and do work."



ZACH MECHAM PLEASANTVILLE

Zach Mecham started his company, Zach of All Trades Media, in 2017 after graduating from Drake University. He initially built his business part-time while working at disability-focused organizations. A natural storyteller, he's been speaking publicly and writing national blogs since age 13. His love for stand-up comedy takes him around the Midwest.

Zach's Muscular Dystrophy requires adaptive equipment and assistance with daily tasks and personal care. Medicaid covers the personal care that private insurance does not. Because of Medicaid's earning limits, Zach can't expand his business fully.

"Zach of All Trades Media is all about helping people tell their stories. I'd love to be able to help more people do that. But I have to be careful not to earn too much."



Personal Stories

KRISTINE GRAVES DES MOINES

Working 30 hours a week for the Iowa Warm Line, Kristine Graves finds purpose in supporting others facing mental health struggles. Having experienced mental illness herself, she knows the importance of her work.

Kristine's income exceeds Medicaid's limits, requiring private insurance that does not cover necessary services, which she now pays for out-of-pocket. In her 20s and 30s, she worked over 100-hour weeks. When she became ill, she accessed vital mental health services through Medicaid. But when she took the Warm Line job in July 2021, she lost that support, leaving her to bear unaffordable costs.

"Cutting people off from services because they get a job is not the way to keep people with mental health issues healthy! Speaking out about living causes a barrier to getting services you might need as a person with a disability. They just kind of cut you off overnight."



ALEX WATTERS SIOUX CITY

Alex Watters, a quadriplegic, earned bachelor's and master's degrees, interned in Washington, D.C., and worked as a political organizer. Currently, he's the alumni engagement director at Morningside University and a city council member in Sioux City.

Though he has private insurance, it doesn't cover the in-home care he needs to maintain an active schedule. Medicaid does, but to stay eligible, Alex must limit his income, decline job offers, forgo raises, and withhold paychecks. He also can't save adequately for retirement, and if he were to marry, his spouse's income could jeopardize his coverage.

"Medicaid's coverage of the personal care I need allows me to be employed and serve my community. But the limits hold people like me back instead of giving us the freedom to flourish."



Working together with policymakers to create an Iowa where people with disabilities can learn, work, and thrive.

2026

Public Policy Priorities

Guide to the Legislature

IOWA DD Council
Preparation, Participation, Power

infoNET



WHO
REPRESENTS
YOU?

2025 | 2026

Your Guide to the Iowa Legislature and U.S. Congress

Bill of the Week/ Issue of the Week

BILL OF THE WEEK

HF252: Comprehensive Transition Programs

Establishes a scholarship program in Iowa to provide financial assistance (up to \$5,000) for individuals aged 18 and above with intellectual, developmental, or learning disabilities who are enrolled in approved college programs.

BILL STATUS

Assigned to Committee:
Senate Committee on Education
chaired by Sen. Ken Rozenboom (R)
from Peña.

Recent Actions:

- Amended and passed by the House on February 22, 2023.
- Referred to the Senate Committee on Education.
- Senate subcommittee recommended passage on March 8, 2023.

TAKE
ACTION ON
THIS BILL



Bill Sponsor:
REP. CHAD
INGELS



Representative Chad Ingels is a farmer, and business owner representing House District 68. He serves on the Agriculture, Economic Growth and Technology, and Education committees, and is the chair of the Veterans Affairs committee. He is the parent to three children, two with Down syndrome, including a daughter who attended the University of Iowa's Reach program.

CONNECT WITH US:

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Preparation, Participation, Power



IMPACT ON IOWANS

This bill aims to improve access to college education and job opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID). Currently, fewer than 2% of young adults with intellectual disabilities go to college. Without some education and training beyond high school, it can be harder for people with ID to be employed and financially secure. Only 15% of those with ID who do not attend college manage to secure paid employment within the community.

QUICK FACTS

- Comprehensive Transition Programs** support students with intellectual disabilities in gaining academic, career, and independent living skills for future employment.
- There are two approved programs in the state of Iowa, **Northwestern NEXT** at Northwestern College and **UI REACH** at the University of Iowa.
- 92% of UI REACH graduates find jobs within a year, and all employed alumni earn more than the minimum wage.
- The cost of these programs ranges from **\$20,000 to \$35,000** per year.
- Students can qualify for federal grants, but since these programs are non-traditional, some grants and scholarships may not apply, making the programs less affordable.

One-Pagers

Employment

IOWA DD Council
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and care they need to live and work in the community. To keep the health care insurance and longterm supports they need through Medicaid, a person's income and assets are capped.

These limitations force people with disabilities to live in poverty, limit the hours they work, avoid marriage, and rely on public assistance programs, as their income and assets are capped.

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Allow individuals to pay a premium based on their annual income to maintain Medicaid services.

Provide tax incentives to companies that hire, provide transportation to work, and allow work-from-home options for people with disabilities.

Fund vocational rehabilitation programs (VRS and Department for the Blind) that focus on the transition to employment at the level that maximizes the federal match so that Iowans can invest in employing more people with disabilities.

Invest in the self-employment program through Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS), as well as small business and workforce development programs that incentivize people with disabilities to start their own businesses.

Invest in rural broadband and high-speed internet infrastructure so that rural Iowans with disabilities can access employment programs and work from home.

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KEYS TO SUCCESS

The keys to success for people with disabilities and their families are the same as they are for everyone:



Employment

Iowans with disabilities hold competitive jobs.



Quality education

Students with disabilities have the supports they need to learn and thrive in an inclusive learning environment chosen by their families.



Supportive communities

Iowans with disabilities have the support and health care they need to live in the community setting of their choice.



Access to quality health care

Iowans with disabilities have the support and health care they need to live in the community setting of their choice.



Accessible voting

All Iowans with disabilities vote!

Accessible Voting

GOAL

All Iowans with disabilities vote!

Recent changes to Iowa's voting laws make absentee and early voting confusing for many Iowans.

Shorter time frames and fewer options for returning absentee ballots discourage absentee voting for people with disabilities.



CALLS TO ACTION

- Lengthen early voting options.
- Create additional and accessible voting options including alternatives for Iowans who are blind to be able to vote privately and independently.
- Increase absentee ballot drop box options.
- Expand days to receive and return an absentee ballot by mail.
- Approve assistance to deliver an absentee ballot.
- Provide ballots in clear language for universal access.

Community Living and Health Care

GOAL

Iowans with disabilities have the support and health care they need to live in the community setting of their choice.

Home and community-based services (HCBS) support an individual's right to live in the community setting of their choice, rather than in an institution. As state-funded institutions close, the opportunities to live in a home or community setting are not keeping up with demand. Low wages for direct support professionals (DSPs), due

to low reimbursement rates for their employers (community provider agencies), result in a lack of staff necessary to provide support. As a result, nursing facilities and other institutions become some peoples' only options.

Similarly, many health care, dental care, and medical equipment

providers have stopped taking Medicaid as insurance because the rates of reimbursement are too low to cover their expenses, and reimbursements are not paid on a timely basis. As a result, many Iowans of all ages are not getting the health care, dental care, or community supports they need to get by, much less thrive.

CALLS TO ACTION

- Increase reimbursement rates enabling community providers to increase pay for **Direct Support Professionals (DSPs)** to at least \$20 per hour without reducing services or hours.
- Provide tax incentives and student debt relief to individuals who are DSPs.
- Eliminate waiver waiting lists so that community living supports can be provided and individuals can live, learn, work, and thrive in their communities.
- Fully fund the **HOME (Hope and Opportunity in Many Environments)** Community-Based Services (HCBS) project and waiver redesign ensuring that people with disabilities receive services and supports.
- Eliminate barriers to establishing an intellectual disability (ID) diagnosis by allowing developmental/behavioral pediatricians and child neurologists to administer tests and evaluate skills, in addition to licensed psychologists and psychiatrists.
- Increase the number of providers who accept Medicaid (medical, behavioral health, and dental) by implementing annual rate increases and reducing administrative barriers.

Key Terms

Direct Support Professional (DSP)

Provider agencies in Iowa employ DSPs to provide services to promote independence in individuals with an intellectual or developmental disability. Duties range from supported living supports and personal care to job coaching. To meet the critical need for DSPs in Iowa, last year the legislature included a 4.1% increase to support rate increases.

What does this mean to a community provider agency? One agency increased its starting wage by 4.1% to \$15.25 an hour to be competitive with other entry-level wages in its community, which is higher than average.

This provider employs 700 DSPs in several communities. Even with the rate increase, it continues to struggle to fill positions and will still need to find other sources of revenue to support its services.

HOME (Hope and Opportunity in Many Environments)

A project in Iowa that is working to improve community services and access to services for people with disabilities and people who are aging.

STACY RING COUNCIL BLUFFS

“

“Alex has chosen to live at home, which is safer, healthier, and more comfortable for him, while also saving Medicaid tens of thousands of dollars per year compared to out-of-home placement. Yet the same hours of care are not covered if the individual stays at home.”

Getting the care you need shouldn't require going to court. What we requested is entirely in line with federal and state laws and codes, yet these statutes are repeatedly ignored by the Managed Care system.”



Education

GOAL

Students with disabilities have the supports they need to learn and thrive in an inclusive learning environment chosen by their families.

Iowa students with disabilities have the right to a high-quality education just as their peers who do not have disabilities. Their parents have a right to choose the environment that they believe to be best for

their success. The number of students enrolled in special education (students on an IEP—Individualized Education Program or 504 Plan) in Iowa rises each year and reached a record high of over 68,187 students in

2023-24, representing 13.4% of Iowa's enrollment. Funding for local services and supports designated for these students has faced annual cuts for several years.

CALLS TO ACTION

- Increase funding for school districts to invest in special education and AEA services so that students with disabilities in public and non-public schools can receive the support they need for an equitable and quality education.
- Allow parents to decide the best environment for their students with disabilities.
- Invest in **comprehensive transition programs** that allow students with disabilities to access secondary education, develop independent living skills, and become fully employed.
- Support professional development training programs to improve safety for students with specific health conditions and/or disabilities, such as epilepsy and autism.

Key Terms

Comprehensive Transition Program (CTP)

Degree, certificate, or non-degree programs established by the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 for students with intellectual disabilities that meet specific criteria approved by the U.S. Department of Education.

They support students with intellectual disabilities who want to continue academic, career, and independent living instruction to prepare for gainful employment.

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Q & A

See you at the Capitol

Disability Employment Action and Awareness Day **Wednesday, January 28, 2026**

2:00 p.m. **Legislative Reception, Iowa DD Council and partners**
Capitol Rotunda

2:30 p.m. **News Conference, Allies in Advocacy**
Employment of Iowans with Disabilities

4:30 p.m. **Legislative Reception, Allies in Advocacy**
Let's Taco 'bout Employment
State Historical Building



THANK YOU!

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