
THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left

Summer 2019

Governor Threatens Medical Marijuana Program

Medicines made from cannabis are helping people who have multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, HIV/AIDS, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, cancer, Parkinson's disease, Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis, autism, terminal diseases, and severe and chronic pain.

These medicines are now legal in 33 states. Unfortunately, it's a whole different story here in Iowa, home of the nation's worst medical cannabis law. In Iowa, the medicine is too expensive and not potent enough to help most people. There are only five dispensaries, none located in rural Iowa, and they are all struggling. Getting approved to buy the medicine is onerous and bureaucratic.

However, this spring Iowans came close to making some important improvements to our failing program. The Iowa House and Senate overwhelmingly approved House File 732.

It looked like suffering Iowans would finally catch a break. They would have access to more affordable, effective medicines—just like the residents of most other states.

Once the Legislature adjourned, however, Governor Reynolds vetoed that bill. Instead of telling the Governor that she made a mistake, the Legislature's Republicans told sick, suffering Iowans they must keep begging for help.

The Republican failure to fix Iowa's failing medical cannabis program means suffering Iowans must continue to use highly addictive, deadly narcotics.

Did you know that, just since January 1 of this year, Iowa doctors have prescribed an astonishing 847,532 narcotic prescriptions for 307,447 Iowans?

The drug companies profit when Iowans are prevented from choosing safer medical cannabis alternatives.

The Iowa Legislature and the Governor can act quickly when they want to. For example, Iowa Republicans approved a two-billion-dollar tax giveaway in less than two days in 2018. Only a handful of legislators and lobbyists had any idea what was in that massive tax cut.

This spring Governor Reynolds signed four bills liberalizing access to alcohol in Iowa. It was a can-do year for alcohol interests. The Governor traveled hundreds of miles to sign one of the booze expansion bills at a brewery!

Days later, our governor had the gall to equate the use of medical cannabis by people dying from cancer to people struggling with alcohol addiction.

Most people I have talked to were offended by this insensitive, hypocritical excuse for preventing Iowans from having life sustaining medicines.

While Iowa Republicans protect drug company profits and boost alcohol sales, Illinois has chosen a different path. At the Illinois state house, they have ended marijuana prohibition. On January 1, 2020, adults 21 years of age and older will be able to legally buy products made with marijuana.

The good news is that Iowa medical cannabis patients will have much easier access (albeit illegally) to less expensive, more effective medicines closer than Colorado. The bad news is that this could put Iowa medical cannabis companies out of business. They are all losing money now and they will lose much more next year.

After five years of excuses and bad decisions by Iowa Republicans, Iowa families are further than ever from being able to get affordable and effective medicines made from cannabis.

The next legislative session starts in January. It may be the last chance Iowa Republicans have to fix the mess they have created.

As a recovering alcoholic, Governor Reynolds should get off her moral high horse and do what's right for our state. Call her at 515-281-5211 to insist that she work to alleviate the suffering of thousands of Iowans.

—Joe Bolkcom is a State Senator from Iowa City

Netroots Nation

Although I have always been interested in politics, technology has never been my thing, so I've been curious as to how Netroots Nation marries the two. Last month I attended the 14th Annual Netroots Nation Conference in Philadelphia to find out for myself.

Netroots Nation is very left-wing. Some of it is inspiring, some of it is frustrating, some of it is funny, and some of it is infuriating. Netroots Nation starts the first General Session with a member of a First Nations Tribe reminding everyone that the land upon which they are sitting was stolen from her people. That is basically it. No request, other than to please acknowledge it. It was very powerful. Of less interest to me was that every large group session began with a couple of minutes of mindfulness. Not my bag.

The conference used completely gender-neutral restrooms. Remember Ally McBeal? It's like that. I think I was one of many conference-goers who struggled with the etiquette. For example, should men still use urinals in what used to be a men's room? Or do you wait until the next stall is open? Many of us recognized that we often do more than just "go to the bathroom" when we go to the bathroom!

This was the largest Netroots Nation conference ever, drawing over 3,600 attendees. They made a point of emphasizing that this was their most diverse conference ever, and it showed. Only 26% of the presenters were nondisabled straight white males. The conference had a definite feeling of female empowerment throughout. I was particularly impressed by Saturday's lineup of Congresspeople. The intro was by Rep. Barbara Lee, who opened with "Wakanda Forever!" She noted that she was used to both being and voting alone in Congress.

Lee was viciously attacked for her opposition to the Iraq War (she was the only vote against it); reading her words today, everything she predicted came true!

Lee introduced a panel of Congresswomen Ayanna Pressley, Rashida Talib, Ilhan Omar, and Deb Haaland to a rousing standing ovation (Haaland is not typically included in "the Squad," but she is a powerful speaker). The timing here was interesting, as President Trump's tweets attacking the Squad came the next morning. I admit, I teared up as each of these newer members saluted Lee for her mentorship. Talib said Lee quietly meets individually with every woman of color every single month. She offers them support that she herself never received.

The makeup of Netroots Nation breaks down roughly into people from nonprofits (ACLU, Sierra Club, League of Women Voters, etc.), groups like Act Blue and Move On, labor, political consultants, tech specialists, and journalists. Over the last couple of years, they have made a strong effort to include more local activists. There weren't many elected officials, though I spoke to a couple of Congressional campaign staffers who said candidates are beginning to realize that this is great training for campaign staff.

I came across only two Iowans besides myself. One, JD Schloten, sat on a couple of panels and did a GREAT job! Because this conference is full of political nerds, I became a minor celebrity simply being from Iowa. They all wanted to know which presidential candidates have good staff, who I have met personally, etc.

I mentioned the "techie" aspect of Netroots Nation. In reality, they could just as easily be running two separate

conferences. Each breakout session had about ten trainings to choose from. Three were very specific to people with tech knowledge; seven were of more general interest. I focused on labor/economics/poverty in the sessions I attended. Much of the discussion was a perfect fit for the issues that I work on every day as a County Supervisor. I attended sessions on local labor law, creating your own chapter of the Moral Majority, rural poverty, and the economics of the minimum wage, and I had a great conversation with the head of the universal basic income movement.

There is a certain amount of star-gazing at Netroots. In addition to the elected officials that speak, the place is crawling with minor celebrities. I spoke with Joy Reid from MSNBC, who was very kind and funny. Former Attorney General Eric Holder was around, just chatting people up. It was wild how nonchalant it all was. Of course, the conference ended with a Presidential Forum. Unfortunately for the other candidates, this was Elizabeth Warren's crowd. Everything she said was greeted with loud applause, and when she was done, the room emptied. Poor Jay Inslee could not even be heard over the rush to get in Warren's selfie line.

My overall impression of Netroots Nation was quite positive. I know this was wrong of me, but I went in expecting to find many of the attendees insufferable. In fact, I am happy to admit I was wrong! Most of the people I met were wonderful. I am definitely interested in giving Netroots Nation another try.

—Rod Sullivan is a member of the Johnson County Board of Supervisors

Housing Justice for All

In this current era rife with massive income and wealth inequality, there is a looming sense of defeatism and cynicism regarding how we can change our current state of things. This is the goal of the right and the powerful: to beat us down into an ongoing and collective retreat. This front of corporate capitalism smells a lot like feudalism; a time in which the ultra-wealthy ate up and developed land for an elite class while renters lived according to the rules created by the rich. This divide in power has been commodified and *capitalized* on.

As a socialist and a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), it is my firm belief that private property promotes and ensures injustice and inequality. So long as we have lords, we will live in a stratified world. We will never live in a fair society when the wealthy own the means of production (our labor) and the means of survival (our housing). If we are to build a sustainable movement to transform our communities, we must organize our workplaces and our neighborhoods. When we are silent and feel defeated, we often surrender our power. But when we are loud and organized, we can build our power—and win.

So how do we continue to win? I believe that we will win when we unite as workers, as renters, as neighbors. We have seen what winning looks like through the housing victories in our Johnson County community and we must celebrate and expand on them. We must celebrate the residents of Forest View and their Tenants' Association for their victory in negotiating their housing future with the city, the

developer, and most importantly, their neighbors. With the help of the Center for Worker Justice, tenants were able to realize and activate their power to win big against the developer class. Using a similar model, residents of Golfview Mobile Home Court organized into their own Golfview Residents Association with the help of the CWJ, the Teamsters, and Team CAN. By equipping residents with the tools to fight back, we can continue to build our power. What developers and landlords have in property value, we have in numbers. When we organize and fight back, we will win.

This is the motivation behind the Iowa City Democratic Socialists of America's recent canvassing efforts as well as our work alongside the Iowa City Tenants Union:

The Iowa City Tenants Union (ICTU) is a tenant-led organization fighting for the rights of tenants. Throughout our county people are going into debt and giving up important essential services like utilities and food in order to pay for rent every month. Meanwhile, landlords and developers get richer. We need a tenants union that can take on landlords, owners, and developers so that we no longer have to put up with rising rents, unreturned security deposits, and other housing injustices. Housing is a human right and we believe that the best way to make sure our rights are protected is to work together with our neighbors and build a strong community of renters who can share knowledge and resources to ensure fair treatment and by working together toward housing justice.

As an organization committed to the fight for housing justice, we recognize that we must focus our energy and resources on a campaign worth building. Our membership overwhelmingly identified housing as our number one issue in Johnson County. Likewise, other chapters of DSA in Iowa have identified this same issue and have begun working towards building renter power. For example, Dubuque DSA has created the Dubuque Renters' Association, Heart of Iowa DSA (Ames and surrounding counties) has created the Ames Tenants Union, and Central Iowa DSA (Des Moines area) has joined the fight against Havenpark Capital in response to it being bought out by the same corporation that absorbed Golfview Mobile Home Park. By building tenants' unions that are of and by renters, we can build a coalition with housing advocates and nonprofits also working towards housing justice. By building this coalition and by recognizing our housing struggles as a collective issue, we can build power across communities in Iowa.

You can follow the Iowa City Tenants Union at www.facebook.com/IowaCityTenantsUnion or contact the union at iowacitytenantsunion@gmail.com. Find out more about Iowa City DSA at www.iowacitydsa.org. To join the DSA, go to www.dsausa.org/join.

—Ryan Hall is a co-chair of the Iowa City Democratic Socialists of America, a founding member of the Iowa City Tenants Union, and a renter in Iowa City

Invisibility

I remember a time when we averted our eyes.

Cell phones weren't so prevalent then, and without a socially acceptable distraction on hand at all times, we averted our eyes. In elevators we looked straight ahead into the blank wall, on public streets with strangers we looked past each other -- and we certainly kept our eyes down at the food bank. I remember clearly staring at the white floor tiles, slightly scuffed from work boots and children's sneakers, as we waited for our turn to collect a paper bag of mostly shelf-stable food items. So often did people look away from me when we pulled out food stamps and WIC checks to pay that I began to look away first as a pre-emptive strike.

An interaction at the market might go like this:

"Miss, you can't buy those with food stamps."

"They're blueberries—they can be bought with food stamps."

"Well my register says you can't. It's not ringing up. You have to pay with real money."

"I don't have any real money."

Those in line behind me begin to look left and right for a faster lane. My cheeks burn. The man directly behind me already has his items on the belt. He stares into his empty cart.

The stigma associated with food insecurity, and with poverty in general, has a way of rendering a person invisible. It becomes

impolite to acknowledge the person, as though acknowledging the person is acknowledging the poverty (and as though acknowledging the poverty insinuates guilt or fault on the part of the impoverished.)

Invisibility is more than embarrassing, however. It is an insidious contributor to the problem. It is sometimes manifested as exclusion from political processes that pertain directly to the systemic and situational barriers that perpetuate poverty, unemployment, underemployment, food insecurity, health disparities, transportation barriers and other ongoing community and societal challenges.

I was celebrated
by the toddlers of
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counter by night.

It is surreal, sometimes, to be present for conversations about solutions and approaches to these issues. When I was on the receiving end of services, it never occurred to me that there might be groups of people discussing what could or should be done about the lack of available housing or childcare or produce for those living in or near poverty. I was far too busy just trying to survive. Occasionally, during the course of one of these conversations, someone will lament the lack of representation among our ranks of anyone actually using these services. Where are the people we

serve in all of this anyhow?

At work, typically. Contrary to conjecture among opponents to federal assistance programs, 19.3 million people in the United States work full time and receive SNAP benefits. I certainly did – and while my position was tragically low pay, it is presently one of those most in need in our state: Child Care Associate. I was celebrated by the toddlers of professionals by day, and invisible to their parents at the checkout counter by night. I rode eight city buses per day to get my children to daycare and myself to work and all of us home again. We did not have internet access, and I was unaware of the local political processes or community think tanks that could have given our family a platform to help others.

Nonetheless—I am thrilled to hear the question asked, and even more hopeful when the group presses for solutions. If those we seek to serve are not here for the discussions about how we serve them, what can we do to make them aware of the process? How can we meet people where they are? How can we ensure their voices are heard?

We must challenge ourselves and each other, in all the circles of influence where we find ourselves members, to continue the work of including those voices too often marginalized.

—Sofia Mehaffey is Director of Community Health and Nutrition for Horizons, and a candidate for Cedar Rapids City Council

A New Direction?

I'll be thinking is this true, will I fail? Am I supposed to fail? Should I just stop trying and give up? But then, that's exactly what they're waiting for me to do. —Tupac Shakur

Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds has yet to provide an explanation for abruptly firing Jerry Foxhoven, the Director of DHS whom she hired two years ago. Reynolds stated that she asked for Foxhoven's resignation because she wanted to go in "a different direction," and there were several factors that led to her rather sudden decision to ax him. No specifics were given. So we are left to wonder.

There's gonna be some stuff you gonna see that's gonna make it hard to smile in the future, but through whatever you see, through all the rain and the pain you gotta keep your sense of humor.

There has been much conjecture around Foxhoven's ousting. For a while his strange yet fascinating obsession with the deceased rapper Tupac Shakur was cited as the reason, but that was denied by both sides.

Could there be a connection to the current lawsuit against the Iowa State Training School for Boys in Eldora and Foxhoven's role when the Girl's Training school in Toledo closed in 2014? Shortly after giving testimony for the Eldora lawsuit, Foxhoven was asked to submit his resignation.

We are the roses, this is the concrete, and these are my damaged petals, don't ask me why thank god, and ask me how.

Foxhoven rose to fame when he chaired and submitted the Iowa Juvenile Home Protection Task Force stemming from Executive Order No. 82 by former Governor Branstad on October 9, 2013. The Task Force was directed to: Make recommendation about how to improve services for residents; Review incident data to ensure a high-level of care is delivered at the Iowa Juvenile Home; Recommend a strategy for the permanent elimination of seclusion

rooms outside the cottage setting; Recommend a strategy outlining the transition of the Iowa Juvenile Home's education plan from being managed from the Department of Human Services to Area Education Agency 267; and Reach other goals and objectives as required by the Office of the Governor. Nothing in either the executive order or the report suggested closing the facility, but that is what Branstad decided to do.

You gotta make a change. It's time for us as a people to start making some changes, let's change the way we eat, let's change the way we live, and let's change the way we treat each other. You see the old way wasn't working so it's on us, to do what we gotta do to survive.

Some legislators and union officials were furious, suing Branstad for overstepping his authority and taking the case all the way to the Iowa Supreme Court. But the matter was moot, the facility was closed, and the Iowa Legislature did not designate money for it in the budget.

You can spend minutes, hours, days, weeks, or even months over-analyzing a situation; trying to put the pieces together; justifying what could've, would've happened...or you can just leave the pieces on the floor and move the fuck on.

Foxhoven was genuinely confused when Senate Democrats at the Iowa Capitol didn't automatically support his confirmation for Director of Human Services when Charles Palmer retired from the position after Branstad resigned from office to become US Ambassador to China in 2017. Didn't these elected Democrats realize that he was also a Democrat and entitled to confirmation?

It's the game of life. Do I win or do I lose? One day they're gonna shut the game down. I gotta have as much fun and go around the board as many times as I can before it's my turn to leave.

After Foxhoven was given the opportunity to lead the Human Services Department for two years, Iowa is facing a lawsuit based on the same practices at the Boy's Training School that had led to Branstad's Executive Order over concerns about the policies and practices at the now defunct Girl's Training School. Boys are being put in solitary confinement for long periods of time. They are being put in paralyzing restraints for hours; one former resident still suffers from feeling violated when staff members physically restrained him and cut off his clothing. Given Foxhoven's expertise from chairing the task force in 2013, shouldn't the insights and recommendations have been applied to the Boy's Training School? Is this the direction Reynolds wants to move away from?

I don't see myself being special; I just see myself having more responsibilities than the next man. People look to me to do things for them to have answers.

Or is Foxhoven correct in saying he was asked to resign because of his questioning the legality of paying a Medicaid expert now working for Reynolds from the Department of Human Services budget? And why exactly does the governor need a personal Medicaid expert?

Through every dark night, there's a bright day after that. So no matter how hard it get, stick your chest out, keep ya head up...and handle it.

—Stephanie Fawkes-Lee is beyond labels

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