
THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left

Summer 2020

How much is a human life worth?

In 1981 I left Iowa City for a family medicine position in Massachusetts.

When I was a family medicine resident and for a short time working around Iowa City, Iowa had a robust public health system and state lab. When health issues occurred, they were closely tracked, and orders were quickly placed to control infection spread. Testing for such infections as strep and sexually transmitted infections were covered by the State Lab. Immunizations were mandatory to attend school.

Fast forward to 2020.

Massachusetts, led by Republican Governor Baker, now has the third highest number of documented cases of Covid-19 in the US. This is due to its population density and the initial unavailability of testing for the virus SARS-COV-19 that causes Covid-19. Due to its public health efforts of strong mitigation, cases of Covid-19 are now decreasing in Massachusetts, unlike in Iowa, where cases are continuing to increase. Now that SARS-COV-19 testing is more available, Massachusetts is instituting wide-spread testing, tracking, and isolation. This is important since many people with SARS-COV-19 have no symptoms.

Unfortunately, Iowa Republican Governor Reynolds has not instituted a robust public health effort to

mitigate or to test, track, and isolate for SARS-COV-19. Cases are increasing, and the effort to control the outbreaks are inadequate. Extended care facilities, prisons, and meat processing plants are hot spots for infection spread. Inadequate testing, tracking, and isolation are clearly present in these hot spots, as is lack of appropriate social distancing and personal protective equipment. Large corporate meat packing plants were told by the Trump administration to stay open. They were also told that interventions to control the spread of SARS-COV-19 were recommendations, not enforceable public health mandates. The Iowa Governor seems to support this lack of enforcement. Local government and public health officials may not be able to intervene. Since many hospitals have closed across rural Iowa, the increase in Covid-19 cases risks overwhelming the capacity of local health care.

The federal response has been chaotic and irresponsible, with no national strategy to clamp down on this virus and resulting disease. Trump has made the pandemic a states' rights issue, allowing the government of Iowa to inadequately control hot spots.

Most workers in packing plants where there is no mandated enforcement are black, brown, or immigrants. Most

people in extended care facilities are at-risk older individuals. A disproportionate number of people in prison are black and brown.

It is understandable that the people in Iowa and across the country are under a great amount of financial and emotional stress due to loss of income and isolating as a result of the pandemic. But the toll of losing over 70,000 people across the country, in this short period of time, is heart-wrenching. In many of the Republican-controlled states, including Iowa, without adequate public health measures the re-opening of their economy's deaths will continue to increase, mostly in high-risk groups.

As Governor Cuomo of New York recently said (and could be said of Iowa): "HARD TRUTH. Project models have doubled the number of expected deaths because of reopening acceleration. HARD TRUTH. How much is a human life worth? HARD TRUTH. That is the real discussion that no one wants to admit."

Where does Iowa's Governor stand?

—Richard Rubin is semi-retired from the University of Massachusetts Amherst Health Service and is a full-time fly fisherman

A fractured people

Our current pandemic situation is bad enough without the grim weight of a fractious political overlay. But we have one, and at times it's discouraging to the point of flattening a person. Yet there may be cause for hope: In 1981, the nation faced a very different pandemic as AIDS emerged in urban communities. It gave rise to cultural and political responses as well.

"It serves them right," was heard across the country, with the unspoken corollary being "...for what they do in the bedroom." As debased as America's level of awareness is now, it was then incapable of a humane response to a disease besetting the community of gay men. An influential sector of our body politic found expression in our president, Ronald Reagan.

His response to AIDS was...not to respond. For all the post-mortem hagiography, and despite any temptation to compare him even a bit favorably to our current disaster-in-chief, Reagan's response to the pandemic of AIDS was monstrous. The words "malign neglect" are surely apt, but do not begin to evoke the murderous wall of silence that was his response to AIDS. Major US cities were being ravaged. Physicians were bewildered, some frightened and foolish. All manner of superstition and fear gripped people and stood with no rebuttal for years. Patients could be turned away, left literally to fend for themselves against a relentless viral foe.

With no guidance from American political leaders, it took years and a savage loss of life for the response to form. Meanwhile, LGBT America faced AIDS head-on themselves, in urban communities of love and untold effort. They did their own nursing, feeding, and literal heavy

lifting. Then, they shouldered the burden of advocacy—navigating the mazes of health care, public assistance, legal battles, and any challenge you can imagine.

AIDS had been identified through clusters of illness in 1981. ACT UP formed in protest in 1987. Enraged by the horrors of a national silence that left corpses in its wake, gay men became the voice of a pandemic. Early on, they were joined by scientists, public health workers, and attorneys. Later, politicians and celebrities came on board. Realizing this pandemic was wiping out vast tracts of American culture itself, people rose in protest, led by the survivors and caregivers of the LGBT community.

COVID-19 is a different virus than the HIV that brought us AIDS. We were warned it was coming. Once again, a US president chose to ignore an impending pandemic, but only until it grew to threaten his political future. Then he quickly pivoted to politicize it in every aspect.

As I write, VP Mike Pence is in Iowa to nudge skittish churches into holding in-person services despite rising case numbers. Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds has opened malls, fitness centers, and tanning salons in spite of data, touting data-driven decisions. The only reason this makes even distorted, marginal sense is that testing is restricted here. The Gov. calls it 'fishing where the fish are.' Sufficient testing is happening only in counties home to stricken meat plants.

The fear inspired by COVID-19 is not the fear inspired by HIV/AIDS. In 1981, our fear was a superstitious plague-fear. Today, the politically powerful fear their inept handling of the pandemic will reveal an

overall unfitness to govern. Today, those who desperately need jobs are forced to live jammed into the space between a paycheck and exposure to an illness they may not be able to survive or pay for if it hits. Today, we face fear of economic collapse and massive unemployment.

AIDS took much from us. But it also gave us something. Voices raised in purpose and well-focused anger changed history, overcoming a bigoted inertia. We may also create something better out of the ravages of the COVID era.

It is possible people will realize the cruelty with which they are being treated by those who swore they would never be forgotten again. The lie of the president stands revealed. It will be up to Americans on both sides of our political divide to decide what to do with the truth of our own time.

We are divided, and yet the horribly sharp, potentially destructive razor's edge driven between us is thin. So thin. If we can wear it down, perhaps a fractured people will knit itself back together. If so, Carl Sandburg's *I am the People, the Mob* will read as prophesy:

When I, the People, learn to remember, when I, the People, use the lessons of yesterday and no longer forget who robbed me last year; who played me for a fool—then there will be no speaker in all the world say the name: "The People," with any fleck of a sneer in his voice or any far-off smile of derision. The mob—the crowd—the mass—will arrive then.

—Kim Painter is the Johnson County Recorder and served as board president of the Iowa Center for AIDS Research and Education (ICARE)

Politics, governing, and protecting Iowans

The headlines in print and online proclaimed Governor Kim Reynolds' message.

"Coronavirus strategy not political, Reynolds says," bannered the May 5 Cedar Rapids Gazette. "Virus response not political, Reynolds says," reported the Mason City Globe Gazette.

Maybe that is the problem. Maybe politics should be part of the equation—not partisan politics, as goodness knows we have enough of that—but governing politics, the kind you use to bring people together to find practical solutions to shared problems.

All of us want solutions that will lessen the spread of COVID-19 and keep people safe, and surely we all would have something to offer if we all were invited to the table. The experience two months into this declared emergency is that few are chosen, and they are not always identified despite their impact on public policy choices with life and death implications.

As she prepared to loosen restrictions in 77 of the 99 counties beginning May 1, Governor Reynolds spoke of her trust for business owners.

"They want to make sure they put all the measures in place, not only to protect their employees, but to ensure ... their patrons, as well as their communities," the Des Moines Register quoted her April 28. "I'm confident in Iowans to do the right thing."

She has made similar comments in the "Iowans will do the right thing" theme throughout this emergency. "It's about trying to do the right thing in an unprecedented time to really engage the health and well-being of

Iowans and their livelihood," the Lee papers quoted her May 5.

Yet, tolls mount for the spread of COVID-19 at packing plants and other venues. In recent days, Peter Fisher of the Iowa Policy Project has identified 10 counties that data show are coming trouble spots, yet are among the 77 counties where rules were just relaxed.

No, we do not necessarily have a problem of politics, but one of blind ideology. Her approach is leave-it-up-to-business, not leave it up to citizens or workers. Her voluntary approach is the same one that brought us assaults on collective bargaining, worker compensation, and wage standards. It has left Iowans no protection against water pollution from industrial agriculture. And it strikes down local control where elected leaders attempt to meet their own identified needs with stronger measures than state law.

The governor should be hearing from more than business. She should welcome the perspectives from union representatives of the workers in essential occupations, from a wide range of fiscal, economic, and human services experts and advocates who could help all Iowans better understand both the issues and the policy choices being made.

Opening doors can open minds. Instead, we have an invitation-only environment at the same time more of us are learning quickly how much and how easily communication can be done remotely. Never has it been easier to invite more to the table.

As of May 9, at least 252 Iowans had died because of COVID-19. The case count was nearly 11,700. In seven weeks, nearly 300,000 Iowans had sought unemployment benefits

because their jobs are interrupted or gone. The stakes are as high as we have seen.

In this situation, it would be nice to be able to trust all Iowans to do the right thing. Yes, some will do it right. But the ones who do not can cause significant, and lasting damage. This is why we have laws, and why public policy makes a difference.

—Mike Owen is Executive Director, Iowa Policy Project, mikeowen@iowapolicyproject.org



1620

The Mayflower landed

1775

The American Revolution began

1830

The Mexican government passed legislation to curb immigration from the United States

1895

The Cuban War of Independence began

July 16, 1945

The United States tested the first atomic bomb in New Mexico

May 15, 1970

Police killed two students on the Jackson State campus in Mississippi

June 2, 2020

Last day to vote in primary

Bizarre!

At this time, the Iowa Legislature is considering an act to reconvene sometime between May 15 and the end of June.

It would be best for the Legislature to reconvene in order to pass a budget and leave all other work on the table. So much of what is yet to come borders on the definition of bizarre: “Very strange or unusual, especially so as to cause interest or amusement.”

Here’s a look at what has been considered so far.

House File 2070: This bill provides that all county-wide elected officials be nominated without party primaries. The way this works is that the general election comes first; the primary election comes in November. It’s possible to have a Democrat run against a Democrat, or a Republican run against a Republican in the general election. I don’t see where it addresses getting on the general election by petition, which of course would screw everything up. This bill remains eligible for debate as it has been approved and recommended by a House State Government subcommittee.

Senate Study Bill 3181: This Senate Judiciary bill would provide the Iowa Legislature with oversight of Iowa Supreme Court decisions, and that district courts and the Iowa Court of Appeals “shall not invalidate a law on any grounds.” Limited space here does not fully exemplify the unintended humor within the bill. One small example: “The intent of this section is to provide for a mechanism in which to resolve disputes regarding the constitutionality of laws between the courts and the legislature, both of which are composed of constitutional scholars.” Scores of lobbyists registered against the bill; no lobbyist in favor.

SF 2351: Called the “Right to Be Forgotten Act,” it’s a world-wide

movement that allows a person the right to “have negative private information about a person removed from Internet searches and other directories.” President Trump would need an entirely new administrative agency just to keep up. The Senate Commerce Committee has approved this proposal and it is available for debate in the Senate at any time upon the senators’ return. Scores of lobbyists registered against the bill; no lobbyist in favor.

SF 2130: Senator Guth (R-Klemme) has figured out an easy way to determine custody of children in a divorce matter when one of the parents exposes that they are gay. “Fraudulent concealment of sexual orientation is a factor in a dissolution action for a court to consider in determining the custody arrangement that is in the best interest of the child.”

SF 2079: This bill would prohibit the state and political subdivisions of the state from accepting payment in the form of virtual currency, such as bitcoins, frequent flyer programs by various airlines, Microsoft Points, Nintendo Points, Facebook Credits and Amazon Coin. The goal seems logical and reasonable, but it raises the question of what happens in a forfeiture proceeding if a drug transaction was conducted using bitcoin? Could that enforcement agency actually seize the virtual currency? What could it do with the seized virtual currency once it was in its control?

HF 2237: Under this law, it would be a serious misdemeanor to smoke ditch weed. The fine for smoking and possessing ditch weed with the intent to smoke it is more serious than being caught with half an ounce of damn good pot. You have to wonder how ditch weed shows up in a urine test.

HF 2444: This bill had problems from the beginning. It must be difficult to write legislation to amend a flaw in the law when the law will still have flaw upon enactment. Fortunately, the flaw will be repaired in the Senate. The current law is as follows: A person commits a simple misdemeanor when the person does any of the following . . . Makes loud and raucous noise in the vicinity of *any residence or public building which causes unreasonable distress* to the occupants thereof. The original bill and the current law are written so grammatically incorrect that the object causing “unreasonable distress” is the “residence or public building.” The bill passed the House 98-0.

HF 2473 and SF 2273: These companion bills prohibit the manufacture, marketing distribution, use, or possession of synthetic urine or a urine additive for the purpose of defrauding a drug or alcohol test. The punishment is a simple misdemeanor. Is this truly a deterrent? Aren’t the consequences of retaking the test and failing it enough? Both bills are funnel-proof and ready for discussion in either chamber at any time.

SSB 3017: This bill would limit what flags may fly over schools and public buildings. This legislation is nothing more than a reaction to one incident and it’s a waste of time. The bill’s subcommittee in the Senate State Government has recommended amending it and passage.

Bizarre? Most of these bills are not merely interesting or amusing. They are dangerous.

—Marty Ryan is a very stable genius

Lensing for the House

Overloaded. With news. With news conferences—sometimes revealing little news but more partisan insults. With announcements of more people falling ill and even dying. Businesses closing—some permanently. More people facing isolation. Families facing distancing. Alone—and yet together. Coronavirus has introduced us not only to a new vocabulary but also a new way of living each day.

Living in the time of this pandemic is not something we were prepared for nor we expected. It is a surreal time of life reminding us more of a movie than reality. We are quarantined. Waving hello to neighbors across the fence. Finding Facetime as the next best thing to being with someone. Giving up plans for birthdays, weddings, graduations—watching our schools close and businesses lock their doors. Our daily lives are upset with no idea of when we will return to normal—or what that normal might look like. Hanging on to whatever small things we can control in our lives. And how can we do that?

Set a daily routine—although different now but it will add some structure back into your life. It also allows you to have some control over something when so much of life is now out of your immediate control.

Reach out to others even in the limited ways allowed today by using the phone, texting or even write someone a note. That connection will replace the isolation we are all experiencing now. A simple act of kindness will be remembered and appreciated down the road.

Stay informed but limit the amount of news you watch. According to the American Psychological Association, too much coronavirus media may be harmful, causing too much anxiety and distress. Anxiety can be exhausting

at a time you need your strength. Best to choose one or two sources to get information and then limit to once or twice a day.

Social distancing is now our way of life, keeping at least six feet apart from others, increased handwashing, sanitizing surfaces, using facemasks and coverings when going on limited visits to the grocery store or pharmacy—all safety precautions to keep us safe.

Finding new ways to fill our days without the demands of school or work may require some creativity. Activities reserved for weekends may now become a part of daily life: watching a DVD, playing a board or card game, reading a book, even cleaning out that closet you have been avoiding.

It is normal to feel some loss over these changes. This new way of life may challenge us physically, mentally and emotionally. While we navigate through these feelings, we may experience wells of emotion and then times of frustration. Channel these feelings into activities—walking, exercising, even working in the yard can help diminish the disruption to your life that you may feel. If you have children, the same is true for them. Help them understand and share what they are feeling in this confusing time.

Part of my daily life is serving in the State Legislature, which is now suspended due to the coronavirus. We have plans to reconvene sometime hopefully soon, at which time we can pass the state budget for next fiscal year. There may also be some policy decisions to be made at that time.

The coronavirus has certainly changed the focus of our work fiscally and governmentally.

Even the job of campaigning is being limited by the coronavirus. Members of

the House of Representatives serve two-year terms and many of my colleagues and myself are facing re-election in November. But the current way of life prohibits traditional campaigning and gatherings where candidates can have face to face meetings with constituents. It has introduced finding new ways to reach voters.

Using the phone is one-sided—people are not answering calls. Forums have gone virtual with the hope voters will watch. Opinion pieces are sent to newspapers with the hope that they are printed. It is indeed a challenging time to connect with voters.

Issues I believe are in the forefront for Iowans are quality education for K-12 and affordable higher education through our community colleges or universities, especially after the coronavirus; healthcare for children, adults and the elderly during and after the coronavirus; access to food, shelter and security, another universal need; employment and the health of our businesses; how do we protect our environment going forward; voting rights for all—elections will continue to be an important way to exercise our voices. These are matters I have worked on throughout my time in the Legislature and will continue to champion. It has been said by a Scottish statesman, “Perseverance is not a long race; it is many short races one after the other.” I ask those of you living in House District 85 for your vote— together we must continue to work to address these concerns for our state, our communities and for Iowans of all ages.

—Vicki Lensing is a candidate in the Democratic primary for Iowa House District 85

Bohannon for the House

I moved to Iowa City twenty years ago to become a law professor at the University of Iowa. I have been proud to be an Iowan because of the State's progressive history. Its longstanding support of public education was a source of pride. It was a pioneer state in the advancement of civil rights. It supported unions and a decent wage because it recognized that when workers succeed, businesses and the economy succeed. It welcomed immigrants to work and build lives here.

Sadly, over the last several years, our Republican-led legislature has been stripping away these values one by one. And now, the coronavirus has magnified the inequities brought about by the legislature's disinvestment in education, healthcare, and worker rights and safety. Our people—especially low-income individuals, the elderly, and people of color—are suffering. Our small businesses are struggling to survive. Our State is in trouble.

Given the economic effects of coronavirus, it might seem like an improbable time to reinvest in progressive reforms. After all, progressives are often accused of costing the State too much money by wanting to give everything away.

In my view, however, pragmatic progressive thinking is just what we need to pull through this crisis. Some reforms might cost the State money up front but are nevertheless crucial to our long-term recovery. Restoring collective bargaining rights, improving the minimum wage and worker safety, supporting small businesses, and investing in healthcare and education are all critical to protecting the well-being of our people as well as to rebuilding the economy from the ground up.

There are also progressive reforms that would actually save the State money and improve what could be a dire budget situation. First, the State must stop paying out hundreds of millions of dollars in so-called refundable tax credits to large corporations. Refundable tax credits are payments that the State makes to these businesses when their taxes aren't high enough to subtract all of the credits that the State has promised them. So not only are these corporations paying zero taxes, but the State is actually *paying them* millions of dollars.

Eliminating these tax credits would save the State millions that it could use to fund other important things, like preK-12 and higher education. Consider, for example, that the University of Iowa has already been asked to model significant reductions in state appropriations. Yet, in 2018-2019, the State gave out \$211 million in refundable tax credits, which was very close to its entire general appropriation for the University that same year. There is absolutely no evidence that these tax credits benefit the economy, while education at all levels manifestly does. This is a case where the progressive platform is just good economic policy that would help to promote the State's recovery.

A second progressive reform would be to strengthen penalties and enforcement against wage theft and the misclassification of workers. These are often problems for immigrant and other vulnerable workers who have little leverage or recourse against their employers. Wage theft is the nonpayment of wages for work performed. Misclassification includes improperly classifying regular employees as independent contractors. These common abuses deprive employees of their rightful pay and other

benefits. At the same time, they defraud the State out of tax revenue that employers should be paying on those employees and increase the number of people needing public assistance. These practices also constitute a form of unfair competition against other law-abiding businesses.

A third proposal would decrease the number of people in our jails by eliminating or lowering mandatory minimum sentences for non-violent offenses. This change would give courts more flexibility in determining just punishments for minor offenses, help to curb the spread of coronavirus in our jails, and reduce the high costs associated with incarcerating large numbers of people.

I am running for the Iowa House of Representatives because I believe it is time to reclaim Iowa's progressive values. I believe in these values because I know how hard it is for people to get by even when they are working hard. I grew up in a trailer in rural Florida. Neither of my parents graduated high school. My dad was a construction worker who suffered for years with emphysema. When his health insurance was cancelled, my family lost everything. Fortunately, I also have experienced the transformative power of education. Public school teachers taught me well and helped me apply to college. Public university tuition was affordable, and I was able to work my way through engineering school and law school.

Given the coronavirus and other challenges we face today, we need progressive reforms more than ever. Iowa City deserves a representative who will champion progressive legislation, show up for every member of our community, and fight for a better future for all of Iowa.

—Christina Bohannon is a candidate in the Democratic primary for Iowa House District 85

Covid-19 in New York: The view from my window

I live in Manhattan, in an apartment at 79th Street and Second Avenue. Many of my neighbors amuse themselves with the idea that we live on the Upper East Side, one of the world's swankiest neighborhoods. We actually live in Yorkville, a more affordable—or perhaps I should say less unaffordable—area on the fringe of the Upper East Side. Though not especially grand, Yorkville is a perfectly nice place to live.

I've been working at home as an editor for five years, so when the lockdown began, late in March, I thought it wouldn't affect me much. (Even when I went to the office five days a week, I communicated with my colleagues mostly by email, texts, and phone calls because I work for a global organization.) But the lockdown has actually changed my job significantly. My employer wants its website to be regarded as the place go for information on Covid-19. We are now posting more articles than ever, mostly on the pandemic. The kind of piece that used to take two months to develop now takes a few days, and to make this happen, my colleagues work nights and weekends. Of course, we don't really know if the business is making money. To tell you the truth, I don't see how it could be. Sooner or later the ax will fall on some of us.

I'm equally troubled by the future of New York. Will people want to live here? Are companies going to continue renting expensive Midtown or Downtown offices? Will employees accept working in them? Can stores come back? Will it be possible to eat in restaurants or go to museums, the theater, concerts, or sports events? I don't understand how any of these things can generate a sufficient income if people have to sit six feet apart at them. Public transit will have the same problem. What about the jobs and

taxes these activities generated? When will I finally be able to get a haircut?

Since I'm 73, I observe the lockdown strictly. My apartment building requires residents to wear masks in all common areas, including the corridors on each floor. Only one person or family at a time can use the elevators or the laundry room. Someone here has been infected, but the management (quite rightly) won't tell us who. All of the neighbors, friends, and colleagues I know with houses in the country decamped for them weeks ago. I'd get my groceries delivered if I could, but there's a waiting list, so I go to the store. Prices there have doubled or even tripled in recent weeks. When I go anywhere, I have to wear a face mask—a rule many people ignore. And the recent ban on plastic bags is now, unofficially, in abeyance because cashiers fear that customers' reusable bags might be contaminated.

I haven't seen my friends in weeks, though we've organized virtual Passover Seders and cocktail parties on Zoom, which, to be honest, I rather like. One of my friends here has a serious and protracted case of Covid-19 (pneumonia, high temperatures), though she's now recovering. I saw her three weeks before she developed these symptoms, so of course I wonder if she infected me. I suppose it's a comfort to know that if she did, my case was asymptomatic and that I have now developed antibodies—whatever good they might do.

Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever be welcome outside New York. This is still, arguably, the global epicenter of the pandemic. A recent article in *The New York Times* suggested that the great majority of Covid-19 cases in our country, including 100 percent of those in Iowa, "came from a line of the virus associated with the outbreak

in New York City." And now I have a confession to make. I visited Iowa City, in mid-February, to attend the funeral of my dear friend Jeff Cox. At that point I was, at most, dimly aware of the coronavirus. For all I know, I was the person who brought it to your state. Please forgive me, Iowa!

New York remains a mess. No one really knows the way forward. But most New Yorkers do agree on one thing. Every evening, at 7 PM, we go to our windows and bang on pots and pans to show our respect for the working women and men who have held the city together during the past few weeks, at a horrifying cost to themselves. Now we know who is really essential. Let's hope that we remember this in times to come.

—Roger Draper is a native of New York City and a frequent visitor to Iowa City

In early April, *The Prairie Progressive* promised to donate \$10 to Iowa Legal Aid for every new subscription and renewal. Readers responded quickly and generously.

The Prairie Progressive has contributed \$710 to Iowa Legal Aid. To see how that money is being used, visit www.legalaidfoundation.org.

Thank you!

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