



Representative Andrew Wenthe

STATEHOUSE NEWS

Capitol Comments

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This week the legislature's busy schedule continued in spite of the weather. Several constituent groups who had planned to make the trip to Des Moines were unable to due to the icy conditions across Iowa. However, I was pleased to welcome Craig Lohmann, Chairman of the Denver School Board, to the Capitol to discuss issues affecting K-12 education funding. I also enjoyed a visit from a group of veterans and veterans' services workers on Thursday. As always, it is great to see people from home when I'm in Des Moines.

One of the things I have been most proud of since being elected as your State Representative is the commitment the legislature has shown to serving Iowa's veterans. Over the last three years, we've been working to expand support for veterans and military families. This will continue to be a focus this year as Iowa prepares for one of the largest deployments in recent memory.

As a state with one of the highest deployment rates, and with

many units being deployed multiple times, there are thousands of families living without a spouse or parent. It must be our goal to make that transition easier. This year House Democrats intend to make military relocations less stressful by allowing spouses who must leave their jobs because of activation to be eligible for unemployment benefits. We also want to protect military families from withdrawal penalties if they leave college mid-term, and are directing state agencies to help service members and spouses with the transfer of teaching certificates or professional certifications to their new home state.

Other plans include making sure veterans don't have to pay state income taxes on benefits they receive from the Veterans Trust Fund and completing the expansion of the Iowa Veterans Home in Marshalltown. Last year, the Legislature created new incentives for employers to hire workers who are also soldiers and provided mortgage foreclosure protection to all Iowans

on active-duty. The Legislature also increased the National Guard Benefit program to more than \$4 million and took steps to help the children of military families to succeed in school despite frequent moves. I am absolutely committed to ensuring that our military families and our veterans continue to have access to the support they richly deserve.

The Legislature continued to focus this week on efforts to be more accountable for taxpayer dollars and eliminate wasteful spending by consolidating agencies and delivering services to Iowans more efficiently. The massive reorganization effort is one of the keys to balancing the state budget this year without raising taxes. There are a host of ideas being considered, ranging from early retirement for state employees to reducing energy costs to consolidation of state purchasing efforts. The Governor has already issued an executive order to start

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the reorganization efforts and a bill will likely be approved by the Legislature in February. The effort, which is already well under way in the House and Senate, is projected to save taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars over the next several years. This important reorganization effort will be critical in helping us craft a balanced and responsible budget

that maintains the priorities of Iowans.

At Right: Brent Wightman, a Veteran from Waverly, Jan Heidemann of Tripoli, a CPC and Veterans Service Officer for Bremer Co., Nancy Edwards, Administrator for Bremer County Veterans Affairs, and Brent Steere, Bremer County VA Commission Chairperson all took the time to visit with me about the current state of Veterans' Affairs in Bremer County



Legislature Takes Quick Action to Assist Schools

The House acted quickly in the first week of session to assist education by approving a package of bills to strengthen education for our students and to protect property tax payers.

Race to the Top

One piece of the package, already signed by Governor Culver, was necessary in order for Iowa to be eligible for as much as \$175 million in



federal funds to ensure that Iowa students are prepared to compete in the 21st century. The program is designed to improve student achievement and help to turn around Iowa's lowest achieving schools. This legislation amended Iowa's laws in some areas in order to qualify for the funding.

The federal government required states, wishing to be considered for funding under the Race to the Top program, to show that a number of initiatives are in place in law when

applying. Iowa already has a number of the required components in its law, which made it easier for Iowa to put together an application for the funds.

If approved for the grant, the funding will be used to help Iowa schools be more innovative in learning programs, work more easily with other school districts to provide programs, and begin turning around Iowa's lowest achieving schools.

State Aid to Schools

Normally, state aid to schools is set by the Legislature 18 months in advance of the school year it is funding. We would be setting the state aid to schools this year for fiscal year 2012, school year 2011-2012.

This year, due to the downturn in the economy, the Legislature delayed action on setting this level of aid to schools until the next legislative session hoping that the economy improves resulting in an increase in state revenues. This would allow the Legislature to set a higher level

of aid to our schools.

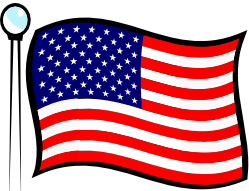
Protecting Property Tax Pay-ers

The final piece of legislation that was passed on Friday includes a bill requiring school districts to spend their cash reserve funds before they levy property taxes. School districts are allowed to use their cash reserves to replace the state aid lost due to an across-the-board cut or an under-funding of the school aid formula. Some districts have a larger cash reserve fund than other districts do.

Recognizing that each school district has its own unique set of circumstances, the Legislature put a process in place to review school districts individually. This will ensure that property taxes are not increased unless the school district can show that it is necessary to provide for all aspects of a quality education.

Supporting Iowa's Military Families

In an effort to support military families, the House Veterans Affairs Committee approved a measure this week to provide unemployment insurance benefits for the spouse of military personnel forced to leave their job due to a



military reassignment or a spouse called to active duty.

House Study Bill 538 intends to support middle class military families who need extra assistance while a military family member is away or in transition. The benefits will be paid out of the Unemployment Compensation Trust Fund.

Currently, at least 17 other states provide unemployment insurance benefits to spouses of military personnel who left employment, due to no fault of their own, and relocated because of a military assignment in another area.

The bill will next be considered by the full Iowa House.

Insurers Must Cover Routine Care for Cancer Trials

Health insurance companies will be required to pay for routine care of cancer patients in clinical trials if a bill passed by the House Commerce Committee is eventually enacted into law.

Health insurers say they already cover these costs, but policies differ, disputes happen, and coverage is still denied. This leaves cancer patients confused and fearful that their insurer will drop them if they join a clinical trial.

Regrettably, this makes them re-

luctant to participate in cancer trials and impedes cancer research. This hurts all Iowans who stand to benefit from more cancer research.

House File 2075 will put cancer patients' minds at ease and make it easier to enroll them in clinical trials by assuring them that their insurer will cover routine care.

The bill only applies to cancer trials approved by the National Institutes of Health and if the patient is referred by two oncology specialists.

If the insurer should deny coverage on the grounds that the proposed trial treatment is experimental, the patient may request a review by the Insurance Commissioner, who must decide within three days.

The bill applies to both individual and group insurance plans, but not necessarily to all Iowans. Many larger employers have self-funded health plans and the federal Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) exempts self-funded plans from state insurance regulations.

Legislature Rolls Out Health Care Bill

Due to the rising costs of health care and the lack of access to care in Iowa, the House and Senate Human Resources committees will be working on a health care bill that will address these issues and build upon Iowa's current health care system.

The legislation, based on the unanimously approved recommendations of the Legislative Health Care Commission, will provide quality health care to adult Iowans who cannot afford insurance coverage.

IowaCare Program

In an effort to provide quality health care closer to home for Iowans, the bill adds a regional provider network to the existing IowaCare health plan, which serves adults up to 200% of Federal Poverty Level (FPL). Currently, Iowans on the IowaCare health plan must travel to Des Moines or Iowa City to receive care.

In addition, the bill creates a new plan called IowaCare Plus for adults between 200-400% FPL, with premium assistance for those

up to 300%. Individuals between 300-400% pay on their own within affordability guidelines passed last year. IowaCare Plus also uses the new regional provider network so Iowans can receive medical care closer to home.

Iowa Choice Exchange

The bill also creates the Iowa Choice Exchange, which is an information-only clearinghouse. The exchange provides choice

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among competing plans by making it easy for individuals and families not covered through an employer to obtain coverage information that is standardized

and transparent. The exchange will also collect quality data. Lastly, a Diabetic Registry is created. The registry will collect data to assist medical providers in tracking and improving care of patients with diabetes.

The bill stipulates that the expansion program and information clearinghouse be implemented as funds become available. The House and Senate Human Resources Committees must approve the bill before it is debated in either chamber.

Disaster Recovery Efforts Continue

In its fourth quarterly report, the Rebuild Iowa Advisory Commission reminds Iowans that, “while significant progress has been made in recovering from the floods and tornadoes of 2008, Iowa’s rebuilding effort is not complete. In addition, much work is still needed to mitigate risk from future disasters and rebuild a safer, stronger, smarter Iowa.”

The flooding, tornadoes, and storms of 2008 created the greatest disaster in Iowa history, and one of the largest in the nation’s history. It is estimated that it caused \$8 to \$10 billion in damage. Tens of thousands of Iowans faced \$1 billion in lost or damaged housing. About 4,800 small businesses and 800 medium size businesses saw damages exceeding \$5 billion. Farmers experienced \$3 billion in lost crops, equipment, and structures. FEMA estimates that local governments and the state of Iowa suffered more than \$1.2 billion in infrastructure damage. To date, over \$3.6 billion has been allocated through federal and state programs for disaster recovery. Although this funding is in various stages of being allocated, over \$1 billion has already been spent.

Rebuild Iowa Coordinating Council

This council was created by the

Legislature to oversee recovery efforts and facilitate communication. It is made up of state agency representatives, local leaders, and legislators. At its final meeting of 2009, the group developed the following goals for 2010 and future years.

- ♦ Restore lost housing stock through housing programs, while returning impacted Iowans to permanent housing.
- ♦ Ensure stability of impacted businesses.
- ♦ Continue to address Smart Planning goals.
- ♦ Complete flood plain mapping in Iowa so communities have the most updated information to make decisions.
- ♦ Increase participation in the National Flood Insurance Program and encourage Iowans to purchase flood insurance to minimize future risk.
- ♦ Leave behind a blueprint for future recovery efforts and establish which agencies will be responsible for various activities related to recovery once the Rebuild Iowa Office sunsets in June 2011.
- ♦ Continue to improve communications on all levels about disaster assistance programs and changes.
- ♦ Maintain a proper system for records retention so documents are not lost in future disasters.
- ♦ Encourage mitigation efforts when building new structures around the state, such as safe rooms, incorporating rules into

building standards and codes.

- ♦ Continue to work with federal agencies to increase flexibility of disaster funding and programs.
- ♦ Connect with older Iowans, children and other populations to make sure they are not left out of disaster plans.
- ♦ Maintain disaster-related mental health programs so help is immediately available following a disaster.

Input from Iowans

Throughout the recovery process, input from affected Iowans has been sought. Speak Up Iowa hearings were held across Iowa in the fall of 2008 to gather suggestions. During the summer of 2009, a Speak Up II survey was used to determine how recovery efforts were going. This coming May, the Speak Up Iowa III survey will go to impacted homeowners, business owners, and community leaders to gauge how the recovery effort is perceived among those hit hardest. They will also be asked what programs they utilized for disaster assistance, how much they received, and their opinion on how easy or difficult the application process was to go through. This will help improve disaster programs offered nationwide and in Iowa.

Criminal Code Committee Suggests Public Safety Board

The Legislature's Criminal Code Reorganization Interim Committee has recommended the creation of a new Public Safety Advisory Board to advise the Legislature about current and proposed criminal code changes.

The board will be part of the Criminal and Juvenile Justice Planning Advisory Council (CJJP). The board will consist of members of CJJP, and will include representatives of the legal system, law enforcement, executive branch agencies, and the Legislature.

Specific Crimes

The Criminal Code Reorganization Subcommittee on Specific Crimes considered changes to several crime categories in Iowa. The subcommittee suggests creating a crime for Robbery in the 3rd degree. The crime would be a non-forcible Class D felony. Under current Iowa law, all robbery offenses are forcible felonies requiring a mandatory sentence.

The subcommittee suggests allowing judges to extend probation for up to a year beyond the maximum period of probation allowed by law. Under current law, a judge cannot sentence a criminal to

more than five years of probation for a felony or two years for a misdemeanor. Probation can only be extended under this new provision if a violation of probation is established.

The subcommittee also suggests equalizing the penalty for escaping from custody, improving the readability of public intoxication laws to make tracking offenses easier, and clarifying the definition of serious injury in the Iowa code.

These recommendations will be contained in legislation that will be addressed by the Legislature this session.

AMBER Alerts – Getting the Correct Information

As hackers have been increasingly sending false AMBER Alerts, Iowa's Department of Public Safety and the State of Iowa AMBER Alert Plan are encouraging Iowans to subscribe to AMBER Alerts directly from law enforcement officials at www.iowaamberalert.org.

Persons who sign up will receive AMBER Alerts from law enforce-

ment in coordination with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. You will only receive a notification when an AMBER Alert has been issued in your area. Too many times AMBER Alerts are passed on from email list to email list with the information being changed, or worse, leading the public to be desensitized about these

alerts.

Poster Contest

The Department of Public Safety is inviting 5th graders to enter their National Missing Children's Day Poster Contest. Entries are due by February 5, and rules can be found at <http://www.dps.state.ia.us/mpic/2010PosterContest.shtml>.

Scholarship for the Arts Grant Applications Due

In an effort to help students continue their education after high school, students planning to enter college next fall with a major in an arts discipline can apply for a 2010 Iowa Scholarship for the Arts by Monday, Feb. 8, 2010. Offered annually by the Iowa Arts Council, the scholarship is awarded to students who will graduate from an Iowa high school during the 2009-2010 academic



year and plan to pursue a proven artistic ability in dance, literature, music, theater, traditional arts, or visual arts at an Iowa college or university. The application is available at www.iowaartscouncil.org.

Each recipient will receive \$1,000 to \$2,000 toward his or her 2010-2011 college tuition and related expenses as a full-time undergraduate at a fully accredited Iowa college or university with a major in one or more of the disciplines con-

sidered for the award.

To be considered for the award, students must complete the scholarship application, write an essay about their future career goals in the arts, and include two letters of recommendation. Applications and attachments are due by 4:30 p.m., Monday, Feb. 8, 2010, in the Iowa Arts Council offices at 600 E. Locust Street, Des Moines, IA 50319. Contact Sarah Ekstrand at (515) 281-4657 or sarah.ekstrand@iowa.gov for more information.