



**The Harkin Institute for Public  
Policy & Citizen Engagement**

# **2026 Iowa Policy Guide**

**Big Issues, Bold Vision**



The Harkin Institute<sup>®</sup>  
CONNECTING PEOPLE WITH POLICY

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# Foreword: A Note from our Executive Director

Dear Policy Makers, Candidates, and Fellow Citizens:

The great state of Iowa has earned over many decades a reputation for considered, collaborative, and largely bi-partisan and non-partisan policymaking. We get to respect our neighbors; we know our civic leaders personally; and when faced with challenges, we rise to the occasion as one. We are active, engaged, and informed about issues that matter in our communities, in our state, and beyond.

At the same time, we recognize that democracy is a rare and fragile privilege, and like all Americans, Iowans cherish the promise of a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

As a non-partisan organization, The Harkin Institute encourages citizen engagement in civic decision-making and provides citizens and policymakers with insight and data essential to moving effective, timely, and important policy forward. In that spirit, The Harkin Institute is pleased to offer its inaugural *Iowa Policy Guide* to key issues in the policy areas we focus on: disability inclusion and economic participation; retirement and long-term care security; public health, wellness, and nutrition; and labor and economic opportunity.

*The Iowa Policy Guide* highlights areas The Harkin Institute's policy researchers have identified as urgent, important, and ready for action. Our purpose in offering it is twofold: First, to raise awareness of these issues; and second, to provide insights we hope will be useful to all Iowans, including policymakers and active candidates for municipal, state, and federal offices, as we figure out how to move forward together.

The Harkin Institute, although non-partisan, takes a progressive view of what local, state, and federal institutions can achieve when they put citizens' wellbeing at the center of what they do. For us, *progressivism* does not belong to only one political party. Rather, we believe that progressive policy is simply policy that maximizes opportunity, dignity, and wellbeing for all people—rich and poor, young and old, no matter their creed, race, identity, or ability.

We recognize that, depending on background, experience, and expertise, each Iowan will have their own views on how to achieve those goals—whether through the free market, regulation, policy mandate, private philanthropy, public morality, or some combination of these approaches. Still, we are confident that everyone aspires to live in a society where they feel secure, healthy, heard, and valued.

Wherever you may find yourself on the political spectrum, I hope you find this guide a useful tool for informing yourself, thinking through big issues, and sustaining conversation—and ultimately action—on these critical issues.

Sincerely,



Craig N. Owens  
Executive Director

# Affordability and Economic Opportunity

Attracting, retaining, and developing a vibrant, high-skilled workforce is an essential component of Iowa's economic and cultural future. While other states are increasing minimum wages and passing legislation that supports working families, a recent report<sup>1</sup> found that 37% of working Iowans struggle to meet their family's basic needs.



## Livable Wages for Iowans

Iowans need access to livable wages. **Iowa's \$7.25/hour minimum wage has not changed since 2008**, while neighboring states have raised their states' minimum wages to \$15 an hour.<sup>2</sup> Raising the minimum wage will increase Iowa's attractiveness, support families, and promote economic activity.

## Permanent Childcare Provider Wage Support

Affordable, abundant, high-quality early-childhood care and education are essential to a thriving Iowa workforce. Increased wages and access to childcare assistance for eligible families create a dependable workforce for childcare centers and other employers alike.<sup>3</sup>

## Protecting Iowa's Affordable Housing

Iowa is experiencing a shortage of over 58,000 affordable rental homes.<sup>4</sup> Federally backed housing programs and public housing provide critical support for low-income households but are still under threat. Inclusionary housing agreements, protecting naturally occurring affordable housing, and expanding state low-income housing development incentives can help remedy this problem.<sup>5</sup>

## Strengthening the Double Up Food Bucks Program

Access to nutritional foods, including fresh fruits and vegetables, is critical for children's health and education and for parents to be able to work. Unfortunately, groceries are among of the first budget items struggling families cut to make ends meet. Investing in and expanding programs like the SNAP Double Up Food Bucks program encourages participating families to purchase more fresh produce, increasing consumption of healthier food options.<sup>6</sup>

**Iowa's \$7.25/hour minimum wage has not changed since 2008**

### References

<sup>1</sup> United for ALICE (2025, May 11) The State of ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Restrained, Employed) in Iowa <https://unitedforalice.org/introducing-ALICE/iowa>

<sup>2</sup> Martinez Hickey, S. (2025, December 16). Over 8.3 million workers will benefit from minimum wage increases on January 1: Nineteen states will raise their minimum wages. Here's where. | Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/blog/over-8-3-million-workers-will-benefit-from-minimum-wage-increases-on-january-1-nineteen-states-will-raise-their-minimum-wages-heres-where>

<sup>3</sup> Common Sense Institute Iowa. (2024, November 19). Iowa's Childcare Solutions Fund: A Model for Closing the Gap. <https://www.common senseinstituteus.org/iowa/research/workforce/iowas-childcare-solutions-fund-a-model-for-closing-the-childcare-gap>

<sup>4</sup> National Low Income Housing Coalition. (n.d.). Housing Needs by State: Iowa. Retrieved January 20, 2026, from <https://nlihc.org/housing-needs-by-state/iowa>

<sup>5</sup> Alcivar, J., & Hauge, M. (2025). Preservation of Federally-backed housing in Central Iowa

<sup>6</sup> Iowa Healthiest State Initiative. (n.d.). How Double Up Food Bucks Works. Retrieved January 20, 2026, from <https://www.iowahealthieststate.com/howtodoubleup>

# Retirement and Long-Term Care Security

Iowans are no strangers to hard work no matter what sector they work in. Every hardworking Iowan should be able to look forward to a financially secure, dignified retirement. Delivering on that aspiration will require a blend of private and public support.

## Allowing Access to Private Retirement Savings Through Employer or State Programs

**Employer retirement savings programs are the most effective tool to save for retirement** through payroll contributions, pre-set and matched contributions, and automatic features. However, access and participation in employer retirement savings programs depends on type of employment, occupation, firm size, and income.<sup>1</sup> **A state retirement saving program that includes part-time workers, with few barriers to entry**, such as those enacted in 20 states, can help ensure every Iowan can save for retirement.

## Enacting Long-Term Care (LTC) Policies and Supports

The United States does not have a comprehensive long term care system,<sup>2</sup> thus financially straining the Medicaid program and uncompensated family caregivers.<sup>3</sup> Enacting LTC policies modeled on programs implemented in other states<sup>4</sup> can help **ensure that people who require long-term care receive adequate access, will relieve family caregivers of financial burdens, and lighten the burden on the Medicaid program.**



## Promoting and Enhancing Financial Literacy Efforts at K-12 and Higher Education

Iowa is among the states increasing its focus on strengthening public school financial literacy and personal finance curricula. To improve financial literacy for K-12 learners, **Iowa can mandate that understanding public programs like Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security** as essential components of comprehensive, lifelong financial planning be required among the state's financial literacy standards and **support teachers with course materials and other resources** to easily meet those standards.

**A state retirement saving program that includes part-time workers, with few barriers to entry...can help ensure every Iowan can save for retirement.**

### References

- <sup>1</sup> Stoycheva, Rayna. 2022. [Closing the Retirement Savings Gap: An Update on State Initiatives](#). Policy Brief 22-1, The Harkin Institute for Public Policy and Citizen Engagement.
- <sup>2</sup> Belbase et al. 2021. [What Resources Do Retirees Have for Long-Term Care Services & Supports?](#) Center for Retirement Research. Policy Brief 21-16.
- <sup>3</sup> Stoycheva, Rayna and Chloe Lepak. 2025. [Long-Term Care Policy Options – A Comparative Perspective](#).
- <sup>4</sup> [Long-Term Care Policy Options](#). Webinar posted on The Harkin Institute YouTube Channel.

# Disability Inclusion and Economic Participation

Thoughtful state policy promotes independence, fiscal responsibility, and economic growth among all citizens. Prioritizing such policies ensures that disabled lowans are full participants in the state's economic life, thus benefiting communities, employers, and taxpayers alike.

## Strengthening Workforce Participation Through Employment-First Policies

Iowa's economy benefits when all residents contribute their skills. Implementing and fully funding **Employment First policies**<sup>1</sup> can help ensure that disabled lowans have access to competitive, integrated employment. When state agencies align policies, performance metrics, and funding streams, they enhance real wages, workplace inclusion, and career advancement.

Modernizing public benefit rules that unintentionally discourage work supports competitive, integrated employment. Removing **Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income income and asset limits for employed individuals with disabilities**—when Medicaid is their only viable source of health care—can promote labor force participation without increasing dependency. Likewise, excluding such personal savings tools as **retirement accounts and education savings plans (401(k), 403(b), 457, and 529 accounts)** from asset calculations will encourage financial independence, long-term planning, and responsible savings without penalizing employment.

## Investing in Education and Post-Secondary Transition

A strong education system is the foundation of Iowa's future workforce. Increased funding for **special education and Area Education Agencies** will help students with disabilities receive consistent, high-quality support. Predictable and



adequate funding will help districts recruit and retain qualified professionals, reduce service gaps, and ensure compliance with federal education standards.

Targeted investment in **post-secondary transition programs** are critical. These programs bridge the gaps between high school and adulthood by providing access to continued education, vocational training, independent living skills, and meaningful employment pathways. Expanding these opportunities will reduce long-term reliance on public services, increase tax contributions, and better align education outcomes with Iowa's workforce needs.

## Building Accessible Infrastructure for Community and Economic Growth

**Infrastructure investments benefit all lowans while addressing barriers faced by people with disabilities.** Expanding accessible public transportation options supports workforce participation, healthcare access, and community engagement—particularly in rural and underserved areas.

**Reliable, high-speed internet access statewide** will allow lowans with disabilities to participate fully in our digital economy, support aging in place, and strengthen rural communities. Continued investment in rural broadband and high-speed internet will unlock telework, telehealth, and remote education opportunities.

### References

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/initiatives/employment-first>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.jpmorganchase.com/content/dam/jpmc/jpmorgan-chase-and-co/documents/policy-center-asset-limit-issue-brief-ada.pdf>

# Public Health, Wellness, and Nutrition

The health and wellbeing of Iowans should be central to all policy decisions. Prioritizing public health will lead to a more vibrant culture and economy, increase tourism and investments, and enhance Iowa's standing among other states. Even policies that do not directly speak to public health and wellness ought to take into account public health impacts as part of the cost of proposed policies.

## Researching and Monitoring Iowa's Cancer Crises

Iowa is experiencing a statewide cancer crisis. The policy recommendations for 2026 prioritize reversing Iowa's alarming cancer trends by understanding and combatting environmental risk factors. Understanding the causes of Iowa's rising cancer rates calls for **restoring and expanding funding to the statewide water monitoring network** to provide comprehensive, reliable, high-quality information; **examining environmental risk factors** that lead to increase a cancer rates; **requiring electronic, geospatial, publicly accessible, and easily searchable manure management plans**; and **incentivizing more monitoring efforts** to include citizens who would can report early indicators for identifying problems.

## Taking a Precautionary Public Health Approach to Agricultural Policy

Taking a precautionary approach can minimize risk from high nitrate levels in Iowa's water and support Iowa farmers, including by **shifting the incentive structure of state programs to measure outcomes**, such as changes in pollution levels, and not just inputs; **funding the IWILL trust created by Iowa voters** according to the formula they approved to restore natural lands and improve waterways; **adopting agriculture standards proven to reduce nitrates in water**, such as mandatory buffers and watershed protection; and **creating a commission of experts in hydrology, epidemiology, economics, and sustainable farming practices** to explore approaches that reduce nitrate levels.



## Adopting a forward-looking food systems approach to agriculture

Many of Iowa's current industrial agricultural practices harm farmers and consumers alike. Making Iowa agriculture work for all Iowans means **taking topsoil erosion seriously** by setting standards that safeguard Iowa's future as an agricultural leader; adopting policies that incentivize farmers to grow food **specifically for human consumption**; investing in farm-to-school, farm-to-hospital, farm-to-institution programs; supporting processing facilities for non-commodity crops; and building expertise at our state universities and extension programs that will **develop markets and infrastructure that make smaller, diversified farms sustainable**.

**Taking a precautionary approach can minimize risk from high nitrate levels in Iowa's water and support Iowa farmers**

# About The Harkin Institute

The Harkin Institute for Public Policy & Citizen Engagement is a nonpartisan policy research institution focused on the main policy areas that shaped Senator Tom Harkin's career: people with disabilities, retirement security, and wellness and nutrition.

**Vision:** A future where everyone has equal access to opportunity, well-being, and dignity.

**Mission:** The Harkin Institute advances inclusive, evidence-based public policy by connecting research, civic learning, and diverse lived experiences. We provide access to trusted information and empower robust civic engagement to promote the public good.

**Legacy:** We are inspired by Tom and Ruth Harkin's decades of public service. Their enduring legacy demonstrates that all of us are interconnected, bound together in a single circle of inclusion, with no one left out.

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