

# IOWA BANS MEDICAID COVERAGE FOR TRANS HEALTHCARE

Section 14 of the HHS funding bill guts gender affirming care

In its latest attack on trans lives, both houses of the Iowa Legislature voted Wednesday, May 14, to pass House File 1049, the appropriations bill for the Department of Health and Human Services. Included in the bill is Section 14, a prohibition on Medicaid reimbursement for “Sex reassignment surgery or associated procedures.” The bill goes on to list hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and any procedure to alter someone’s sex characteristics. Of course, this ban only applies to trans people who receive those procedures; mastectomies, hysterectomies, orchiectomies, and HRT are still covered for cis Iowans. This amounts to a full ban on trans healthcare for Medicaid recipients in Iowa, and could have knock-on effects related to how hospitals and other care providers treat trans patients.

This attack comes months after Iowa became the first state in the nation’s history to remove civil rights protections for transgender people, or any protected class for that matter, an action that drew thousands of protestors to what became the largest demonstration ever at Iowa’s capitol. That demonstration didn’t stop the Republican supermajority in the legislature from enacting hate, however. Steve Holt (R-Denison), the bill’s floor manager, said on the record

that day that removing trans healthcare from Medicaid was a core motivation behind the broad assault on our civil rights.

This kind of medical discrimination is not new to Iowa. Medicaid was never particularly friendly to trans people, even after we were added to the Iowa Civil Rights Act in 2007. Challenges to Iowa Medicaid’s refusal to cover trans healthcare go back to 2017, and community members successfully overturned the state’s policy of denying coverage in 2019, with the Iowa Supreme Court finding the policy constituted sex discrimination against trans Iowans, as well as violated the equal protection clause of Iowa’s constitution. With those protections now legally questionable, if not entirely removed after the passage of House File 418, Republicans took their chance to reinstate their previous policy.

While February’s civil rights bill saw dozens of Democrats stand up against its injustice, only two legislators in the House spoke against Section 14: Aime Wichtendahl (D-Linn), Iowa’s only transgender legislator, and Elinor Levin (D-Johnson), the only other openly queer legislator. While seeing solidarity between queer lawmakers is heartening, it was devastating to see so little action taken to fight this bill. We’ve seen time and time

again that the majority of Iowa’s Democrats would rather play meek patsies to oppression than take any real risk, or use any sort of legislative strategy to fight back. Having to watch the few queer people who have a voice in the legislature try to overcome the rot at the heart of their party to argue for their lives and wellbeing is maddening.

Wichtendahl was frank in her remarks, saying “when I last spoke on this issue, I mentioned that I transitioned to save my life.” She went on to share her own history with debilitating depression and suicidality before transitioning, the impact it had on her family, and how having the chance to live as herself helped her turn her life around. “because I was able to receive gender-affirming care, my life instantly got better,” she said. Wichtendahl went on to highlight the other attacks on healthcare from the legislature, including Medicaid work requirements and religious freedom carve outs for insurance companies. “Your healthcare is very much in jeopardy, and don’t think for a minute that they will stop with the transgender community, because they won’t,” she said, adding that “the only real way to guarantee healthcare for anyone is to guarantee healthcare for everyone.”

Matt Windschitl (R-Harrison) interrupted Wicht-

endahl at one point, challenging the relevance of her remarks and accusing her of assuming Republican’s motivations in advancing Section 14. This felt like a ploy to prevent her having the full last word on the bill before voting. We’ve seen similar tactics used in Montana and Virginia to stop trans legislators from speaking in defense of their own lives and wellbeing.

Elinor Levin, who represents the “blue dot” of Iowa City, was brief, imploring her colleagues to talk to the trans people who would be hurt by the bill, listen to their experiences, and see how vital and lifesaving gender-affirming care can be.

In her closing remarks, the bill’s floor manager, Ann Meyer (R-Webster), denied that gender-affirming care is even really healthcare. “The treatment that will be provided for gender dysphoria is behavioral health treatment” she said, gesturing to Rep. Wichtendahl. “I’ve heard psychological issues surrounding what might happen if someone is denied this treatment, and I will say, if someone is in mental distress, if someone is suicidal, the treatment for those issues is not surgery, is not hormone treatment, it’s behavioral health.”

Webster then went on to talk about the funding gaps in her own bill, suggesting that the money Iowa would save by cutting gender-affirming care - which by her own admission amounted to only ~\$2.5 million over the last decade - could be used to plug a multi-million dollar hole in funding for pediatric cancer research.

This is, accidentally, a concise summary of the conservative position: gender dysphoria isn’t real, you aren’t worth caring for unless you try to kill yourself, and even then we should force you into conversion therapy. There is a trans woman standing right in front of her, telling her that healthcare made her life worth living, and Webster simply refuses to listen. Erasing her colleague

HEALTHCARE, cont’d on back

# BRAD'S BIG BAD BASTILLE

The Sheriff wants to sell you a bigger jail that we don’t need



Caricature of Johnson County Sheriff Brad Kunkel

If we listen to Sheriff Brad Kunkel, Johnson County should build a new jail that can be expanded to cage 250 of our neighbors. The current space that cages 92 just doesn’t cut it these days. Just because Johnson County built the current jail for 46 people and, shortly after it opened, doubled its capacity doesn’t mean you need to be suspicious now.

Look, Kunkel says, we’re a bigger community now. That’s why he’s gearing up to ask voters to shell out more than \$80 million for his dream jail next fall. Sure, he’ll tell you our average jail population has been steadily dropping, but we can’t just divert our way out of crime.

Our buddy Brad even has a very official-looking study to point to - it’s got three volumes plus some appendices and a final report - that basically proves it. Look at the chart on page 14 that shows the projected jail population reversing course just after we have actual numbers. Hard to argue with that.

That Very Official Report came from lots of study and

conversations with Johnson County’s facilities manager and lots and lots of law enforcement - Kunkel, his command staff, County Attorney Rachel Zimmermann Smith. They know what we need. That’s why the report proposing the Jail Mahal is called a needs assessment. They’re experts!

Just because other people impacted by and involved in the jail, such as defense attorneys, public defenders, family members of the incarcerated and the people who have been jailed themselves, weren’t involved in this assessment doesn’t mean it’s flawed. It just means those people are all still stuck using video calls to see their clients and loved ones in this palatial prison.

If you don’t think we need a big new jail, Sheriff Kunkel will happily read you the list of charges one inmate is currently facing to prove to you that we need his proposed edifice to the carceral system. He’s a fan of data, but he’s an even bigger fan of anecdota.

JAIL, cont’d on back

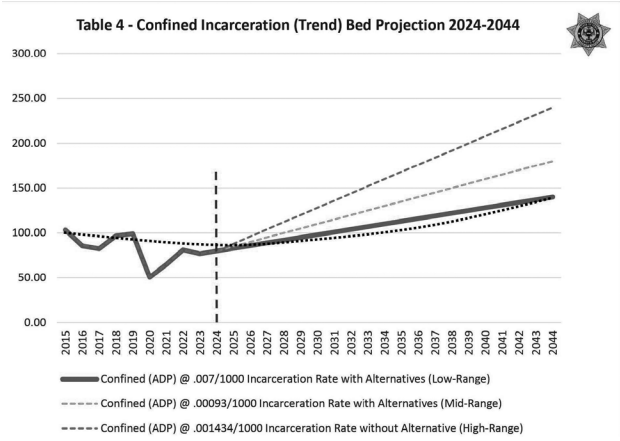


Table 4 of The Johnson County Jail needs assessment shows a decreasing Confined Incarceration Bed trend that has decreased from 2015 to 2024 but is projected to begin increasing next year, without explanation. via Abolition: Yes!



HEALTHCARE, cont'd

isn't enough for Webster though; she also has to scapegoat trans people for an imagined host of funding issues that her own policies caused, just to score a sound byte for her eventual re-election campaign.

The bill passed the House 63-28.

Across the rotunda in the Senate, only one legislator, Molly Donahue (D-Marion), spoke out against Section 14, though she did a respectable job. Donahue was passionate, calling the bill "cruel" and "inhumane" while pointing out the nakedly unconstitutional discrimination at its root. "... That is a violation of equal protection, plain and simple. That is discriminatory. It is harmful and that is unconstitutional under the equal protections clause of our state constitution, something that the Iowa courts and others across the nation have already repeatedly affirmed," she said, pointing to her ability to get a hysterectomy while a trans person could not.

The Senate Republicans were initially a bit shaken by Donahue's remarks, voting to defer the bill immediately after she spoke, but they ultimately came back and voted to pass HF 1049 31-15.

Iowa joins a number of other states, most notably Florida, Arkansas, and Texas, in this kind of structural discrimination. There are ongoing legal challenges to every Medicaid care ban in the country right now, but policy and position changes at the Justice Department following Trump's inauguration threaten the future of all of those challenges, especially as the prospect of a United States v. Skrmetti decision looms in the coming months.

Section 14 goes into effect July 1, on the same day we lose our civil rights protections.

So, what now?

A non-exhaustive list of what to do now:

If you are on Medicaid you need to try to make your appointments and get your refills now. You will not be fully removed

from Medicaid, but expect access to things like blood work for your HRT, regular appointments with your prescribing doctor, and potentially your scripts themselves to go away, or at minimum become more difficult. Try contacting your care providers every day until they do something. Some LGBT clinics in the state are prioritizing Medicaid patients in their scheduling and operations in advance of this bill; take advantage of that if you can. If possible, talk to your doctor about updating your diagnosis from "Gender Dysphoria" to "Endocrine Disorder" or "Hormonal Imbalance." You have to advocate firmly for what you need, and stand your ground if you are challenged by uncooperative providers.

Reach out to the Iowa Trans Mutual Aid Fund. ITMAF exists to give direct aid to community members in need, and can help you cover the costs of HRT without insurance. They have a simple intake process that opens at the beginning of every month, and distribute funds directly to you to pay your prescription costs. They've helped hundreds of Iowans, including me, who have struggled with accessing and affording our care.

Autonomy Iowa City is a bodily autonomy action group that is stepping up to support our community's immediate care needs. If you are impacted by Section 14 and are losing access to your HRT, reach out to them for support with accessing care.

Look for local mutual aid networks like Des Moines Mutual Aid, Iowa City Mutual Aid, and Fairfield Mutual Aid that are trying to support their community members in emergency circumstances.

Unionize. The best defense against these attacks is organized and coordinated labor. Your union can look to ensure trans healthcare is part of your insurance, and can take meaningful actions like labor stoppages and strikes to get power back in the hands of working people.

If you are an ally to our community, you have some additional steps:

First, make sure the

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KATE MARGHEIM (THEY/THEM/THEIRS) / @KATEMARGHEIM

trans people in your life and your community are supported. Reach out and check in with your loved ones to see what support they need, and do what you can to help. This could be as little as cooking a meal or offering emotional support - every trans person in Iowa has just been thrown into an ocean of uncertainty and anxiety about our futures and our access to the care that makes our lives whole - or as much as helping them cover the uninsured costs of their medical care. Everything you can do to help you do, from now on.

Second, donate to the Iowa Trans Mutual Aid Fund. They are a registered 501c3 that directly supports trans people in Iowa who are asking for help meeting their needs, whether that's affording their HRT, covering co-pays for surgery, purchasing necessary clothing like binders and gaffs, or covering transportation to access their care in the first place. ITMAF is all volunteer run, and their only overhead is the cost of their accountant. ITMAF is the best way to help get direct aid into the community, especially if you are outside of Iowa. The vast majority of the

money ITMAF distributes comes from in-community donations and in-community fundraisers, trans people giving back what little bits they can when they can. In order to meet the coming shock of need, ITMAF needs more support.

Third, show up. Go to protests. Go to city council meetings. Be loud. Be on the front lines of this fight with us. Trans people have to take on huge risks advocating for our rights and our lives every single day, we need our allies to fight just as hard.

And finally, LISTEN TO TRANS PEOPLE. We are the experts on our lives, our needs, and our healthcare. Period.

These are all things that the trans community already does. Our community has been doing them for decades to help each other survive. If you are really an ally, you have to join in that effort too.

Many members of the trans community in Iowa, myself included, have felt abandoned and forgotten by media and legal resources, which are often directed either to larger states, or states where liberal organizations feel they have a better chance of winning. I wanted to try to do *something*, to say *something*, to do what I can to make sure that our community in Iowa is at least informed and given proper context for everything that's happening.

- MIDNIGHT ZERO



Donations support homeless and housing insecure people in Iowa City and queer incarcerated people in Iowa. Consider a monthly donation to help sustain our work!

Poetry

THE HEART DOESN'T KNOW

BY BOBBY MESSIER (PAWZ)

Sometimes the heart doesn't know what it wants  
Sometimes it gets tricked, fooled or taunts  
Sometimes the heart just doesn't understand  
That the love it may feel for someone may not be so grand  
Sometimes you fall so in love that you think your heart might burst  
Only to turn around and feel the same old hurt  
When you let your heart take the fall  
Be prepared for the hurt that might come to call  
Sometimes the heart doesn't know what to do  
To either say "piss off" or "I love you"  
Sometimes the heart doesn't understand that when it lends  
That when it gets broke, it's not easy to mend  
My heart's been broken so many times  
That the scars of where it broke are very thick lines  
I'm tired of the pain my heart leads me to  
Because it got broken when it leads me to you  
Now the pain I feel hurts down deep  
So I think from now on my heart I shall keep  
So I'll finish this poem as I try not to cry  
Because you broke my heart again when you said goodbye

JAIL, cont'd

Still don't believe him? He'll gladly take you on a tour of the current jail, built in 1981. And he's right: the Johnson County Jail is an inhumane place. It's also crumbling on the outside, structurally failing on the inside and leaking sewage everywhere. What he won't tell you is that even with these hazards addressed, it will remain an inhumane

place: a building solely dedicated to caging our neighbors. But maybe we can call it the Community Justice Center to feel better about that? Just spitballing here.

But Brad's Very Official Report did have one great idea in it: it proposed a new layout that would reduce the jailer-to-inmate ratio by half. I'm good with firing jailers. Let's do that part.

- NEEDOH

DECLASSIFIEDS

Volunteer for the Iowa City Community Fridge

Open 24/7

Wright House of Fashion, 910 S Gilbert St., North side facing Jimmy John's, Bus stop 7010

Email [iowacityfridge@proton.me](mailto:iowacityfridge@proton.me) to be added to the food drop off group chat

Help clean the fridge on a monthly or weekly basis by signing up using the QR Code

AUTONOMY IOWA CITY

Supporting bodily autonomy, right here in Iowa.

Assistance getting abortion pills for a self-managed abortion or miscarriage

Assistance with out of state travel for abortion related medical care

Support and education for people choosing self-managed abortion

Free DIY HRT

autonomyiowacity.org

ASK AN ANARCHIST

Life got you down? Having trouble navigating this fucked-up capitalist hellscape? Get some good-ol'-fashioned anarcho-advice: