

# 11 new Iowa laws include criminal penalties

By TOM FOLEY  
Iowa Capital Dispatch

Iowa drivers will be more likely to get pulled over after July 1 if they are behind the wheel with their cellphones in their hands. This new law is one of many passed by the Iowa Legislature during the 2025 session set to go into effect at the beginning of July.

Senate File 22 bans the use of cellphones and electronic devices when not in voice activated or hands-free mode while operating a vehicle. Police officers will begin pulling over distracted drivers and charging them with a warning starting July 1. Come January 2026, offenders will be charged with a simple misdemeanor, punishable by a fine between \$100 and \$850.

Here are 10 more laws that create additional criminal penalties or expand the definition of previous crimes that go into effect July 1:

### Driving with an open-container THC beverage

House File 181 prohibits open-container beverages containing THC in the passenger area of motor vehicles. People are allowed to transport open-beverage THC drinks in the trunk of their vehicles but if it's anywhere else in the car, and they risk being charged with a simple misdemeanor punishable by a \$260 fine.

Senate File 260 creates a graduated penalty for altering or tampering with a gift card with intent to defraud. Under the new law, a violator commits forgery and is guilty of different charges based on the fraudulent amount or value of goods purchased with a fraudulent card. The crime is a class C felony if more than \$5,000 is uploaded to a card or obtained in stolen goods; a class D felony if the fraudulent value is between \$5,000 and \$1,000; an aggravated misdemeanor if the fraudulent value is between \$1,000 and \$500, and a serious misdemeanor if the fraudulent value is under \$500.

Additionally, the value of retail mer-

chandise fraudulently obtained within a six-month period will be aggregated and the defendant will be charged for the total amount.

### Infrastructure sabotage

House File 879 expands the definition of "critical infrastructure sabotage" to include a telecommunications service, information service or cable service, a wireless service or broadband generation, transmission or delivery service. Individuals found guilty of willfully impairing critical infrastructure are guilty of a class B felony punishable by up to 25 years in prison and a fine between \$85,000 and \$100,000.

### Grooming

House File 180 defines grooming as an attempt to persuade a minor to commit an unlawful sexual act, punishable as a class D felony. Individuals found guilty will be classified as tier 1 sex offenders. Those convicted are subject to 10 years in prison, with possibility of parole. This law explicitly includes law enforcement sting operations within the statute, meaning even if the intended victim is an undercover police officer, individuals can be prosecuted for grooming.

### Obscene materials to minors

Under House File 306, people age 18 or older who knowingly share or exhibit obscene material to a minor, other than the parents or guardian of the minor, are guilty of a public offense.

Upon first offense, violators will be charged with a serious misdemeanor and subject to up to one year in jail and/or \$430-2,560 in fines. A second offense is an aggravated misdemeanor and subject to a minimum mandatory confinement of one year which will not be deferred or suspended. Following a third offense, individuals are charged with a class D felony with a mandatory minimum sentence of three years.

Minor-to-minor distribution of obscene

material is also considered a public offense and individuals under 18 found guilty will be charged with a serious misdemeanor.

### Health care provider assault

House File 310 expands the definition of health care providers to protect against assault. Anyone working, volunteering or participating in an educational course at a hospital or rural emergency hospital or nursing home is now protected under this law.

Persons found guilty of assaulting a health care provider under the new definition can be charged based on the severity of the assault ranging from serious misdemeanor to a class "C" felony based on the severity.

### Human trafficking

House File 649 expands the definition of human trafficking. Someone who attempts to purchase services like commercial sexual activity from a law enforcement professional posing as a trafficker commits a class "D" felony.

The bill also expanded the definition of "services" to no longer require an "ongoing relationship" between the person who requests unlawful services and the victim. The new definition is performing activities under the supervision of or for the benefit of another, including commercial sexual activity and sexually explicit performances.

The new definition of "victim" now includes all of the following: a person subjected to human trafficking, a person identified as being subjected or targeted for human trafficking and a law enforcement official impersonating a human trafficking victim. A class D felony is punishable by up to 5 years in prison and a fine ranging between \$750 and \$7,500.

### Possessing visuals of a minor engaged in unlawful sex act

Senate File 150 ensures persons in possession of visual depictions containing pictorial representations of a minor engaging

in a prohibited sexual act, including altered or edited pictures, of different minors will be punished with separate offenses for each "pictorial representation." Multiple depictions of the same minor engaging in a prohibited sexual act will now be prosecuted as separate offenses for each representation. A person guilty of this offense will be charged with a class "D" felony for a first offense, and a class C felony for subsequent offenses.

### Assault on law enforcement professional

Senate File 397 expands penalties for assault on persons engaged in certain professions. Under this bill, assault against a peace officer, jailer, correctional or juvenile detention staff, or employee of the Department of Inspections, Appeals and Licensing who conducts investigations or inspections, is punishable up to a class C felony. All individuals found guilty of assault on these protected professions must serve a minimum term of seven days.

Additionally, the definition of assault has been expanded to include contact with saliva through tossing, spitting or throwing.

### Firearm possession by felons

Senate File 462 significantly increases penalties for firearm possession by felons for repeat offenders. First-time offenders face a class D felony with a mandatory minimum sentence of two years; second-time offenders would face a class D felony with a mandatory minimum sentence of four years; third-time offenders would face a class C felony with a seven-year mandatory minimum sentence and fourth or subsequent offenses would face a 10-year sentence recommendation. The bill prevents courts from deferring or suspending sentences, except for first-time offenders with a county attorney recommendation.

## LAWS

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SLAPP lawsuits, can see expedited relief in courts under House File 472. SLAPP lawsuits are cases brought by an entity against news organizations or activists to suppress public speech or reporting on an issue by engaging in an expensive, drawn-out legal battle. The new law allows these lawsuits – court actions related to First Amendment rights, like the freedom of speech and press – to be addressed more quickly. The law passed includes a caveat that anti-SLAPP protections cannot be applied retroactively, meaning that only lawsuits filed July 1 onward are eligible for expedited relief.

**Citizenship verification for voters:** House File 954 allows registered voters to have their citizenship status challenged at the polls. However, supporters of the measure and Iowa Secretary of State Paul Pate, who proposed the law, say it also contains provision that will prevent the need

for widespread voter eligibility challenges similar to what happened in the 2024 election, by allowing the Secretary of State's office to verify citizenship status of registered voters before an election through contracts with state and federal agencies, as well as private entities.

The measure also includes a ban on ranked choice voting, though this component of the bill does not go into effect until Jan. 1, 2026.

**Election recounts:** The process for conducting – and calling – election recounts in Iowa will be different under House File 928. Initial election results must be within a threshold of 1% or 50 votes, whichever is less, and within a 0.15% difference for recounts in statewide and federal races, for a candidate to request a recount under the new law. Previously, candidates could request a recount with no limitations on the margin of victory in initial results, though the state would only cover the costs of a recount if results were within one percentage point.

The law also changes the composition of election recount boards to be led by the county auditor, with staff and hired election workers making up the boards. An equal number of workers from each political party is required.

**Pharmacy benefit managers:** The law setting regulations on pharmacy benefit managers (PBMs), Senate File 383, is a measure some pharmacists and supporters say will help keep rural and independent pharmacies across the state in business. The law stops PBMs, the entities that negotiate prescription drug prices between drug manufacturers, health insurance companies and pharmacies, from engaging in certain business practices that push consumers to use mail-order or specific pharmacies, like the use of financial incentives or penalties. It also sets a dispensing fee of \$10.68 from PBMs to pharmacists for each prescription filled at rural and small pharmacies.

Though the law took effect July 1, a lawsuit from several businesses and organizations filed in late June is seeking to overturn the measure.

**Firearm age limits:** The minimum age to own and carry handguns, like pistols and revolvers, is lowered from age 21

to age 18 by House File 924. While buying a handgun from a federally licensed firearm dealer would still be banned for 18- to 20-year-olds under federal restrictions, the measure makes a change that lawmakers said addresses recent federal court decisions that found similar laws restricting firearms for adults under age 21 were unconstitutional.

**Cellphones in school:** With rules set to take effect as K-12 schools return for the 2025-26 school year, House File 782 requires public K-12 school districts set policies that, at minimum, restrict the use of cellphones during instructional periods. The measure, one of Reynolds' priorities for the 2025 legislative session, includes exceptions, such as students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 plan that involves the use of a cellphone or other device in their accommodations, and when a school district approves a parent's request for their child to retain access to their phone because of a "legitimate" reason related to their mental or physical health.

**Fetal development instruction:** Senate File 175 requires Iowa schools' human growth and development classes for students in grades 5-12 include fetal development videos and graphics that depict "the humanity of the unborn child by showing prenatal human development, starting at fertilization." The content shown in schools to meet this requirement cannot come from entities that perform or "promote" abortions, or that contract, affiliate, or make referrals to organizations which perform or promote abortions.

**Threat assessment teams:** Senate File 583 allows K-12 public school districts, private schools and charters schools to establish threat assessment teams to prevent school shootings and violence. These teams, which can be made up of school officials, law enforcement, mental health and social services workers, are able to share "reasonably necessary" information about students if their behavior is deemed a potential safety risk to other students or school staff.



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