

GUEST COLUMN

These impressive graduates show how Iowa can save money and save lives

Expanding drug courts can reduce crime, prison costs

By Lynn Hicks, Iowa Writers Collaborative

The event featured many of the trappings of a law school commencement: The graduates’ families came to campus carrying flowers, a state Supreme Court justice sat amid the dignitaries, and speeches overflowed with words of praise and promise.

“You have faced challenges that most cannot imagine,” Drake Law School Dean Roscoe Jones told the graduates on June 13. “You have not only changed your lives, you have also changed the lives of your families and communities.”

The pomp and circumstance matched the occasion’s significance. Only nine people — six men, three women — completed the rigorous program with strict requirements. Some finished in two years, and one took four. Another had graduated four years ago, relapsed, and repeated.

Polk County’s Intensive Supervision Drug Court is indeed a long, difficult journey, filled with 12-step meetings, curfews, community service, court hearings, and “dropping UAs.” Many of the graduates said they didn’t believe they would make it.

“A year ago, I was ready to give up. Staff wouldn’t give up on me,” said one graduate, Rodney Davis. “I now have a life that has meaning,” including a supportive employer, a commercial driver’s license, and a future.

Drug court graduation is one of the most inspiring things I’ve witnessed in a courtroom. It also leaves me wanting more: more graduates, more success stories, more treatment programs across the state. Iowa could do much more to expand this alternative to prison.

Drug courts are reserved for defendants whose addictions lead to crime. They are at high risk of repeatedly stealing or committing other offenses to feed their habits.

Polk County created the state’s first adult criminal drug court in 1996, just seven years after the nation’s first drug court was established in Miami.

I attended my first drug court graduation in 1999. One of the graduates was a bear of a man who showed me a photo of his emaciated face when he was regularly using meth. He gushed about how the court had changed his life. It was the first time I’d ever seen a defendant hug a judge.

Such happy outcomes have been documented in multiple studies in Iowa and nationally. While results vary depending on many factors, graduates have lower rates of recidivism and substance use, and the treatment is far more cost-effective than incarceration, studies show.

An Iowa Department of Corrections study showed that every \$1 spent on drug court returns a \$9.61 benefit over a 10-year time frame.

Despite the results, funding has been inconsistent and depends on a mix of local support, state appropriations, and federal grants. “In general, Drug Courts have been left to their own means to fund and provide training to Drug Court Judges and staff, identify treatment providers, and otherwise enhance their programs,” according to a 2018 study of Iowa specialty courts by the National Center for State Courts.

Now that the Iowa Legislature has finally come up with a structure to spend opioid settlement money, expanding drug courts and other treatment programs should be on list of uses.

In Polk County, drug court graduations are held two or three times a year. Nine people is considered a large class; the graduation on June 13 occurred in the courtroom of the Drake Legal Clinic to accommodate the crowd.

Currently, 24 people are in the county’s drug court program, charged with crimes including theft, fraud, forgery, and burglary. Many more defendants qualify, if the program had more staff.

Drug court isn’t cheap, as it requires a judge, prosecutor, defense attorney, probation officer, coordinator, and support staff. But it’s generally a third of the cost, per participant, of prison.

The morning before the noon graduation on June 13, District Judge Jeffrey Ferrell presided over the regular routine of drug court. Defendants reported on their progress and gave updates on their work, community service, and treatment plans.

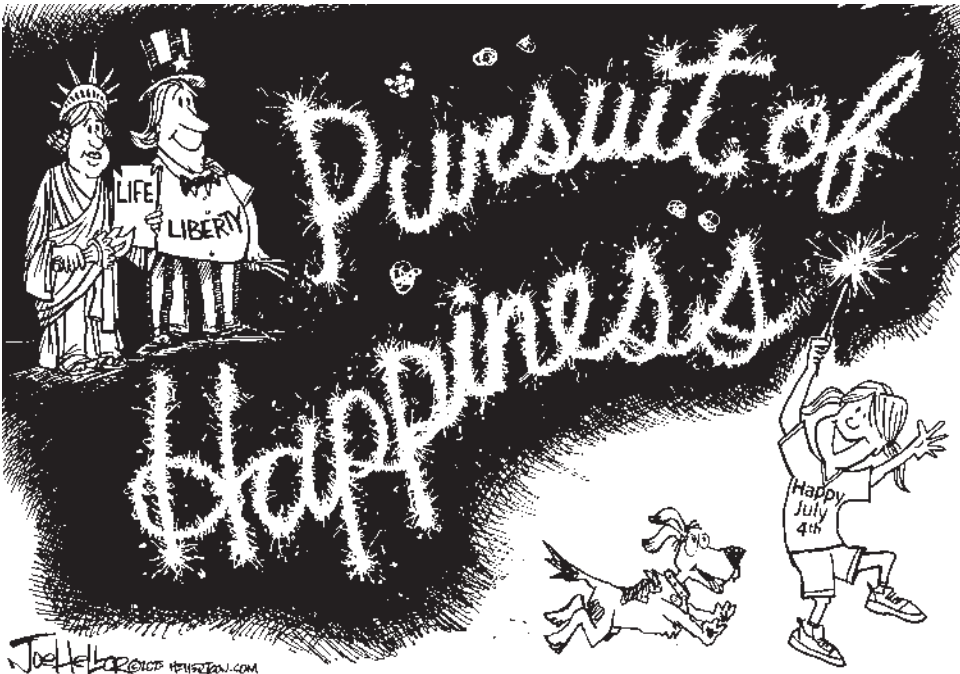
The reports went deeper than that, however, as the participants shared about larger issues they were confronting: past traumas, personality conflicts, relationship issues, and other root causes of their addictions.

The staff challenged the participants with some of the mantras of drug court:

“Own your mistakes.”
“All the truth, all the time.”
“Your worst day sober is better than your best day high.”

Later, participants listened to the graduates reinforce those lessons. The grads shared how they “learned to love myself” and “untangle the mess inside me.” They thanked their family, court officials, sponsors, therapists, and each other.

Graduate Jeremiah Bender summed up the goal: “Recovery isn’t just about staying clean, it’s about building a life worth living.”



Iowa’s fangless watchdogs

By Ed Tibbetts, Iowa Capital Dispatch

Members of Iowa’s congressional delegation love to cite the GAO.

Since the dawn of DOGE, they have increasingly styled themselves as watchdogs against wasteful government spending. And in the process, they frequently turn to Government Accountability Office reports to criticize government spending. Why wouldn’t they? The GAO, along with inspectors general, are the ultimate pros at finding waste, fraud and abuse in the federal government.

Created in 1921, the GAO is a non-partisan, independent agency that works for Congress, and its latest annual report says its recommendations have led to \$725 billion in government savings since 2011. That’s serious money. Which, if you ignore all its bloviating, puts DOGE to shame.

I’m a big fan of the GAO’s work, too. But perhaps not for the same reason as many of the politicians in Congress who like to cite its reports. I believe the GAO should find waste and inefficiency wherever it exists in government. No matter who the occupant of the White House is.

I also think it should do its lawful duty, which can include determining whether the executive branch has illegally refused to spend funds appropriated by Congress.

Apparently, Republicans believe this, too. Or at least they did when Joe Biden was president.

In 2021, congressional Republicans, including most of Iowa’s delegation, complained that the Biden administration was illegally refusing to spend congressionally appropriated funds on Donald Trump’s border wall and asked the GAO to investigate. In one letter, which Sen. Joni Ernst signed on to, Republicans stated Congress holds the “power of the purse” and “an appropriation act is a law like any other.”

These days, though, they don’t seem so eager to defend their powers; not to mention the law.

They may not be too eager to defend the GAO, either. This week, members of the House Appropriations Committee panel moved forward on a bill to slash the GAO’s funding by about half, to \$415 million a year. The

bill also would eliminate the agency’s ability to bring civil action to enforce the law when it comes to congressionally appropriated funds.

So far, I haven’t heard a peep of protest from the so-called fiscal conservatives in Iowa’s congressional delegation.

There’s probably a reason for this.

The GAO is in the crosshairs of the Trump administration. In just five months, the agency has twice found the administration illegally withheld congressionally appropriated funds.

Last week, the agency said the administration illegally withheld grants and contracts for museums and libraries around the country.

In May, the GAO found the Federal Highway Administration unlawfully withheld money Congress had appropriated to build electric vehicle charging stations in the 50 states.

Sen. Chuck Grassley actually voted for the 2021 bi-partisan infrastructure law that included this funding, and Iowa was allocated \$51 million for charging stations. (Last October, the Iowa DOT announced it had awarded an initial \$16.2 million to build 28 fast-charging stations in the state, but this is now on hold.)

Trump’s questionable spending freezes, enacted in the early days of his second term, aren’t rare. Politico reported in April the GAO had undertaken 39 investigations into Trump funding holds. At the time, US Comptroller General Gene Dodaro, who heads the GAO, said the administration had “not been responsive” to its questions.

In fact, Office of Management and Budget Director Russell Vought made it clear he didn’t care what the GAO found. He as much as conceded the GAO would issue even more reports that the administration had acted illegally. But he called them “non-events with no consequence.”

It’s almost as if he knew he had nothing to fear from the Congress that ordered this spending.

Which, of course, he doesn’t.

This wasn’t hard to predict. Remember when Trump fired a bunch of inspectors general at the start of his term? Grassley co-authored a letter in response—after initially

musing that Trump may have had “good reason” for the dismissals—but nothing appears to have happened since then.

As a watchdog, Grassley no longer has any fangs. Neither do the rest of the Republicans in Congress. Not with Trump in the White House.

Now, House Republicans want to defang the GAO.

Make no mistake, a neutered GAO would cost the taxpayers a lot of money. It would incentivize the waste and abuse DOGE disciples like Ernst and Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks profess to be fighting.

I should note the GAO found in 2021 that the Biden administration did not violate the law when it came to border wall spending. That angered some Republicans, who at the time complained of bias. They still are complaining. But to me, this sounds like sour grapes. Apparently, these Republicans missed the GAO decision last week finding the Trump administration acted lawfully when it came to limits on spending related to wind energy.

In other words, you win some, you lose some.

Members of Iowa’s congressional delegation claim to be fiscal conservatives. In my opinion they are not. Ernst votes for huge appropriations bills while trying to divert attention with her “squeal” awards. Meanwhile, the federal debt, as a share of the US economy, has grown from about 31% of GDP to 121% of GDP in the 44 years Grassley has been in the US Senate.

Still, if they were true fiscal conservatives, wouldn’t they stick up for the GAO?

Look at it this way: This is an agency that costs millions of dollars but saves billions of dollars. That’s the very definition of fiscal conservatism.

Now, it could come to pass these Republicans on the House Appropriations Committee won’t get their way. It’s possible their attempt to neuter, or intimidate, Congress’s real guardian against waste, fraud and abuse will fail. But wouldn’t it be nice if members of Iowa’s delegation—who brag to the voters they’re fighting wasteful spending—stuck up for the pros who are actually doing the work?

The Bloomfield Democrat

July 2, 2025 | No. 27

The BLOOMFIELD DEMOCRAT (USPS 058260) is published weekly each Wednesday by

Bloomfield Communications, Inc.
207-209 S. Madison, P.O. Box 19
Bloomfield, Iowa 52533.

Subscriptions rates are \$56 in Davis and surrounding counties and \$69 elsewhere.

Periodicals postage paid at Bloomfield, Iowa.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to:

The Bloomfield Democrat
P.O. Box 19,
Bloomfield, Iowa 52537

The Bloomfield Democrat is a member of the Iowa Newspaper Association and the National Newspaper Association.

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