

TOP STORIES

CAMPAIGN ALMANAC

# National Dems set sights on Iowa House, Senate

Also, Republican candidate wins Iowa House special election

Gazette-Lee Des Moines Bureau

The campaign arm of Democratic state legislatures is adding both the Iowa House and Iowa Senate to its 2026 target map, signaling that national Democrats see new opportunities to chip away at Republican power in Des Moines.

The Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee said its post-2025 election analysis showed Democrats overperformed in targeted races by an average of 4.5 percentage points — gains the DLCC argued could translate into “the most significant Democratic gains at this ballot level in two decades” if repeated in 2026. The expanded target map, outlined in the group’s strategy memo, highlights efforts to break the GOP supermajority in the Iowa House and prevent Republicans from regaining one in the Iowa Senate.

“2026 is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to fundamentally transform state legislative power, including making inroads in Iowa,” DLCC President Heather Williams said in statements announcing both moves.

By adding the Iowa House and Iowa Senate to the DLCC’s target map, “we are expanding our winning strategy to chip away at Republican power and create lasting power in statehouses all across the country,” Williams added.

Iowa Democratic leaders welcomed the attention and resources. House Democratic leader Brian Meyer said, “We are thrilled the DLCC recognizes the opportunity to elect more Democrats in the Iowa House as we hold Republicans accountable for failing voters and raising the costs



Representatives assemble in the House chamber during the first day of the 2025 legislative session Jan. 13 at the Iowa Capitol in Des Moines. (Nick Rohlman/The Gazette)

for everyday Iowans.”

Iowa Senate Democratic leader Janice Weiner pointed to recent special-election gains, saying Democrats “broke the Republican super majority in the Iowa Senate” this year and enter 2026 with “momentum at our backs.”

“Now, with the DLCC as a key partner, we’re ready to recruit strong candidates, contest every seat possible, and reach every voter to turn the tide and make lasting inroads,” Weiner said in a statement.

The DLCC, which supports Democratic state legislative campaigns nationwide, says its 2026 map includes 42 chambers where it sees opportunities to flip seats, build Democratic power or break GOP supermajorities.

## WENDY LARSON WINS SPECIAL ELECTION

Republican Wendy Larson won Tuesday’s special election in northwest Iowa’s House District 7, keeping the GOP’s 67-seat supermajority intact in the Iowa House.

Larson, of Odebolt, will succeed former Rep. Mike Sexton, R-Rockwell

City, who resigned in September to become state director for the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Iowa Rural Development office. Unofficial results from the Iowa Secretary of State’s Office show Larson winning 70 percent of the vote, defeating Democrat Rachel Burns, who received 30 percent.

“I’m very blessed to have the opportunity to serve House District 7,” Larson said in a statement. “Throughout this campaign, I vowed to be a common-sense, conservative leader for rural Iowa in the Statehouse. I look forward to delivering on promises that I campaigned on, including protecting landowner rights, providing property tax relief, and protecting our children. I’m eager to carry the voices of House District 7 in Des Moines and deliver results for rural Iowa.”

House District 7 covers Sac, Pocahontas and Calhoun counties and parts of western Webster County.

Larson, who ran against Sexton in the 2024 GOP primary, is a deaconess at Kiron Baptist Church and a

Mobile Food Pantry volunteer, and holds a marketing degree from Colorado State University.

Her campaign this year emphasized landowner rights in eminent-domain disputes, opposing vaccine mandates, strengthening gun rights, fighting illegal immigration and protecting children from “political indoctrination” in schools.

House Speaker Pat Grassley, R-New Hartford, praised Larson’s “resounding victory” in a statement.

“Iowans continue to reject out-of-touch liberal agendas and opt instead for more of the common-sense, freedom-loving approach you’ve come to know from Iowa House Republicans,” Grassley said. “We are proud to have a strong leader for House District 7 in Wendy Larson, and we look forward to her joining us

in the Iowa House.”

Iowa Democratic Party chair Rita Hart credited Burns, a speech language pathologist, educator and first responder, for outperforming expectations in the heavily Republican district, saying she ran “a gutsy and inspiring campaign ... overperforming by 11 points and forcing Republicans to spend over \$35,000 in a district that Donald Trump won by 52.”

Larson’s victory is the fifth legislative special election in Iowa this year. A final 2025 special election is scheduled for Dec. 30 in Polk County to fill the Senate District 16 seat vacated after Sen. Claire Celsi’s death in October from an undisclosed illness.

Democrat Mike Zimmer, of DeWitt, flipped a GOP-held Eastern Iowa Senate seat in January, while Republicans narrowly held a House district in March after the death of Rep. Martin Graber. In April, Democrat Angelina Ramirez won a Cedar Rapids-area House seat vacated by Sami Scheetz, and in August, Democrat Cateilin Drey captured a Sioux City-area Senate seat previously held by the late Rocky DeWitt — a win that ended Senate Republicans’ supermajority.

The 2026 Iowa legislative session begins Jan. 12.

## PUBLIC-WORKER UNION BACKS SAND

One of the state’s largest public-worker unions is endorsing Rob Sand for governor.

AFSCME Council 61,

which represents more than 40,000 public workers in Iowa, Missouri and Kansas, said it would announce the endorsement at a public event Saturday in Des Moines.

In a news release, the union noted it follows Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO — another of the state’s largest public-worker unions — in endorsing Sand.

“Public service workers have kept this state running through crisis after crisis,” AFSCME Council 61 President Todd Copley said in the press release. “Our endorsement reflects a deliberate, member-driven process focused on choosing leaders who respect our work and understand what it takes to strengthen public services in Iowa.”

Sand, Iowa’s state auditor since 2019, is one of two Democrats running for governor, along with West Des Moines political consultant Julie Stauch.

Five Republicans are vying for their party’s nomination for governor: western Iowa U.S. Rep. Randy Feenstra; state legislator Eddie Andrews, of Johnston; former state agency director Adam Steen, of Runnells; farmer and business owner Zach Lahn, of Belle Plaine; and former state lawmaker Brad Sherman, of Williamsburg.

Iowa’s 2026 gubernatorial election is open-seat after Republican incumbent Gov. Kim Reynolds announced she will not seek another term.

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CAPITOL NOTEBOOK

# State’s unemployment rate dipped in September

Also, Iowa accepting proposals to bolster rural hospitals, expand care access

Gazette-Lee Des Moines Bureau

Iowa’s unemployment rate decreased by 0.1 percentage point to 3.7 percent in September, according to new data that was delayed by last month’s federal government shutdown, according to the state.

Iowa’s 3.7 percent unemployment rate in September was lower than the national rate of 4.4 percent but higher than the 3.3 percent rate in Iowa in September 2024.

While Iowa had a higher unemployment rate and 8,400 more unemployed Iowans this September compared with 2024, the state also had 24,600 more people working and a higher labor-force participation rate in September 2025 compared with the year prior.

Iowa Workforce Development is working with the federal government to get job numbers for October and November, according to a news release from the state agency. Those numbers are expected in January, the agency said.

## STATE ACCEPTING PROPOSALS TO BUILD OUT RURAL HEALTH CARE PLAN

Iowa health officials are now accepting submissions for a suite of rural health projects under the state’s “Healthy Hometowns” proposal tied to a \$50 billion federal initiative aimed at shoring up strained rural hospitals and strengthening local health systems.

The Iowa Department of Health and Human Services on Wednesday released multiple requests for proposals seeking applicants to build out key components of the plan, which is tied to Iowa’s request for up to \$1 billion over five years through the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services’ Rural Health Transformation Program. Applications are due Jan. 5.

The request for proposals cover a broad range of projects, including establishing regional Centers of Excellence in areas such as maternal health, behavioral health, specialty care and chronic disease management; providing technical assistance to rural hospitals and clinics building hub-and-spoke care models; supporting cancer-

focused care coordination and sustainability; advancing co-located, community-based service models; expanding cancer prevention and screening and radon mitigation; and funding medical equipment upgrades and workforce recruitment incentives for rural providers.

Centers of Excellence will function as regional hubs that specialize in targeted areas of medicine and collaborate with surrounding health care providers, public health agencies and community-based organizations (spokes) to improve access to care in rural communities where such services are limited.

The federal funding is designed to help rural hospitals navigate the financial pressures caused by federal Medicaid reductions by modernizing care delivery, expanding preventive and specialty services and improving care coordination across regions.

Iowa’s congressional delegation has urged CMS to approve the state’s application, calling the program a critical investment in rural health care.

CMS is expected to announce state awards by Dec. 31.

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