



IOWA INITIATIVE

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Co-President’s Letter

Pat Higby, AAUW Iowa Co-President

What if Jehovah’s Witnesses had the same power as Evangelical Christians? Would they ban all blood transfusions, just as Evangelicals have banned abortions? Religious control of science kept Galileo under house arrest. We would still be teaching an earth-centric view of our solar system if not for the Protestant Reformation, which indirectly assisted Copernicus in his work on a sun centered system. Now a religious group, Christian Nationalists, want to reshape America. Their plan is detailed in *Project 2025*.



Another item has been added to their agenda: repeal women’s right to vote. James Silberman tweeted “We’ll call this Project 2035.” You can Google Joel Webbon or John McEntee for more information.

James Madison was wise enough to see the necessity of separating church and state. His first amendment to the Constitution prohibits the state from creating an official religion or favoring one religion over another. It appears that Christian Nationalists want to repeal both the 1st and 19th Amendments! In summary, I fear for our future when religion controls politics, science, and medicine. The Protestant Reformation was successful in restricting the power of the Catholic church. To stem the power of Christian Nationalists we will need a super collaboration of organizations and individuals. Our mission has always been gender equity. I find it strange that to achieve gender equity we must also fight for religious equity! It will be a stormy time, with many difficult battles. Rough seas make good captains. We are all going to be great captains for gender equity when this war is done.

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News Flash:

Branch Members to Take Human Trafficking Prevention Month Proclamation to Mayors in their Communities

Mary Ann Ahrens, HT Taskforce Chair

Branch presidents, in an early December Zoom meeting with state board, gained information, instruction and resources for branch member use in the **2025 January HT Prevention Proclamation Project**. Branch presidents will or have already shared this information with members along with an “ask” if they want to take part in this event. This is part of Iowa Network Against Human Trafficking and Slavery’s continuing work along with AAUW Iowa’s to help increase community awareness, learn more about human trafficking, and support critical prevention efforts within Iowa. This is a great opportunity for our branches and members in each of their communities to gain both visibility and credibility on this issue. Let your light shine! Check with your branch president for materials. You can also contact our state co-presidents, Pat Higby (patricia.a.higby@gmail.com) and Kim Folkers (Kimberly.Folkers@wartburg.Edu), or members of the Human Trafficking Task Force, Mary Ann Ahrens (maahrens@mchsi.com), Maxine Lampe (lampe.maxine@gmail.com), and Marielle Sweborg (ellesweborg@gmail.com). [Use this link to view the proclamation.](#)

Stronger Together—AAUW Iowa Reaches out to Other Organizations

Members of the AAUW Iowa Board are looking ahead to the next few years as a challenge, and we recognize that there may be people near us who need support. We owe a debt of gratitude to Dev Kiediash for getting us started on this effort. We have formed an ad hoc task force to reach out to other organizations who support human rights. The following letter is being sent to other

organizations, inviting them to work together with us. We call this effort Stronger Together. Task force members include Pat Higby, Dev Kiedaisch, Mary Helen Stefaniak, Ann Gale, and Diane Kearns.



"Black lives matter. Women's rights are human rights. No human is illegal. Science is real. Love is love. Diversity makes us stronger. Kindness is everything."

We love seeing these signs in our communities. A majority of people in the United States believe in human rights, whether they are women's rights, civil rights, Native American rights, LGBTQ+ rights, workers' rights, immigrants' rights, the rights of people with disabilities, environmental rights, and more. **Human rights are our country's foundation.**

It is important in the days ahead that we recognize this commonality and work together. In the past year AAUW Iowa members have helped purchase yard signs in support of Iowans for Gun Safety Coalition. We helped the ACLU of Iowa collect names for their Reproductive Freedom petition. We also contributed to the purchase and distribution of Reproductive Kits with the Family Planning Council of Iowa.

To make progress, we need to work together and support

each other.

AAUW Iowa is compiling a list of organizations in Iowa that are working for human rights. This list with its contact information will allow each of us to reach out to other organizations with information about events, fundraisers, or other activities. With one email your organization can notify many organizations, and those contacts can pass the information on to their members, so that our reach becomes much broader and our voice more powerful. We will list each participating organization on our AAUW Iowa website with a brief description of their mission, a link to their website, and (optional) phone number and/or email address. You may add the list--or any of the links on it--to your website as well.

We look forward to adding your organization and contact information to our group. If you have questions, or if you know of another group which should be added to the list, please let us know. It's time we unite to be **Stronger Together.**

Where Are the New Members?

Elaine Kresse, AAUW Iowa Membership Vice President

We all lead lives outside of AAUW. Do we share our work or love for AAUW with those others. Some of us are working on immigration politically. This the story of how Lisa Killinger, a member and former AAUW Distinguished faculty winner, and I manage to do a bit of AAUW advertising.

I arrange the speakers for my DAR Chapter at our local naturalization ceremonies. I've done that for years. And during picture and general well-wishing time I often have an opportunity to mention AAUW to new citizens. Many are doctors, engineers, teachers, and one was my nail specialist. She had done my nails the day before.

December 9th was special because Dr. Killinger was the speaker. She has also organized our branch International fashion show for the last three years. How easy was that to weave it into my introduction of her. So many were

dressed in native garb. It was easy to say we were members of another organization that had a fashion show and invite them to talk with us after the ceremony. Many did. They asked Lisa about the fashion show and they asked me what AAUW is. If we want to stay vibrant in the world, we can't hide our light under a bushel. I am now recruiting in other groups working on immigration "problems" to help with a reception 4 times a year for the new citizens. I've worked hard in the past on the issues, but it feels so good to serve on the joys of immigration. I'd love to see AAUW participating in the joys as well as working on the problems. I'm sure you all already do that in other ways. Think of the ways you can work inviting or sharing information about AAUW into the positive work in your life.

It brings hope back!

Ready To Run Iowa

Ready to Run[®] Iowa is a nonpartisan campaign training program to encourage women to run for elective office, position themselves for appointive office, work on a campaign or become involved in public life as leaders in their communities. Since 2007, the Catt Center has offered the Ready to Run Iowa program every other year as part of a national network founded by the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

Although some of the Ready to Run Iowa workshops address topics unique to women as they seek greater participation in the political process, the training is open to anyone.



2025 Ready to Run Iowa

The February and March workshops will be held virtually, and the April workshops will be held at Reiman Gardens at Iowa State University. Registration is required for all six workshops, but is free for February and March. The \$25 registration fee for each of the April workshops covers lunch and refreshments and is waived for Iowa State students. Registration opens one month prior to each workshop date.



Feb. 21

Getting Involved in Politics — 9-11:30 a.m.

- Message from Congress to Campus
- Serving on boards and commissions
- Finding a race

Deciding to Run — 1-3:30 p.m.

- Iowa election laws
- Overcoming doubts or anxiety
- Women's campaign experiences

March 28

Launching Your Campaign — 9-11:30 a.m.

- Creating a campaign plan
- Building a team
- Hosting campaign events

Campaign Fundraising — 1-3:30 p.m.

- Fundraising: Donors, PACs and parties
- Asking for donations
- Iowa campaign finance rules and regulations

April 25

Campaign Messaging — 9-11:30 a.m.

- Your story: Crafting a campaign message
- Getting media attention and interviews

Talking to Constituents — 1-3:30 p.m.

- Taking the mic: Forums, debates and stump speeches
- Using online strategies
- Fieldwork and direct voter contact



Photos from the naturalization ceremony described in the previous page:



Elaine Kresse and Lisa Killinger with three new citizens



Dr. Killinger speaks to the new citizens.

Looking Ahead to the Legislative Season

Diane Kearns, AAUW Iowa Public Policy Director

It has been an interesting election year. As the Iowa General Assembly 91 gets ready to convene, it is difficult to know what will be brought forward. A point of interest is the fact that Speaker Grassley has established a new committee to conduct a comprehensive review of Iowa's higher education system, curriculum, and administrative costs according to the Chairman of this committee, Representative Taylor Collins, from Mediapolis. The committee will work to ensure that Iowa's universities are "mission-focused" and that they aren't using tax dollars without oversight according to the Chair.



One area they will look at is administrative spending. This includes discussion about administrative costs at public universities, especially as it relates to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). A group of Iowa State University students have formed a coalition to speak out against anti-DEI legislation which was passed during the last session, which alongside DEI directives from the Iowa Board of Regents, have led to state universities restructuring and closing DEI offices and eliminating positions.

Cary Stough, president of the Campaign to Organize Graduate Students (COGS), said he is concerned for students of color and international students on campus who have lost resources because of the changes to the DEI programs on campus. A "culture of fear" has been created

on campus, Stough said, as students and graduate workers teaching classes are unsure of what they can and cannot say without facing consequences. Representative Collins said the state must turn universities away from "political agendas and back to the pursuit of academic excellence." Those in opposition stated they have never strayed from that pursuit and there are no political agendas that they have seen on campus. It will be interesting to see where this goes and will require close monitoring during the legislative session.

I also sat in on the State Public Policy Zoom meeting from National on December 4. There was much discussion about AAUW National Priorities with the 119th Congress. According to AAUW CEO, Gloria Blackwell, the election results are extremely sobering. "AAUW is committed to holding all elected officials accountable about women's rights, body autonomy, and access to education, and economic opportunity, particularly for women of color."

"When women are able to make abortion care decisions for ourselves, we're able to control our health and economic security," said Meghan Kissell, AAUW's senior director for policy and member advocacy. "A second Trump presidency puts this fundamental right in jeopardy."

Blackwell, stated "A functioning democracy demands work every day of the year. It is now, after an election, when the real work begins. We must come together and continue the fight to advance equity for women."



Official Statement



We are extremely frustrated at the National Archivist's refusal to publish the ERA. Her decision to side with the Trump administration and against legal scholars and the American Bar Association is reprehensible.

Dr. Shogan, publish the ERA. Women around the country have waited long enough.

— GLORIA L. BLACKWELL
Chief Executive Officer

Are You As Frustrated as Gloria Blackwell?

The ERA meets all constitutional requirements to become an amendment, yet the [Archivist of the United States Colleen Shogan](#) refuses to publish it.

Here's what you can do:

<https://aauw.quorum.us/campaign/94965/>

[#ERAnow](#) [#WomensRights](#)

Street Grace: A Mission to End Sexual Exploitation of Children

Mary Ann Ahrens, HT Prevention Taskforce Chair

Recent statistics tell us that in the past 15 years the number of children among identified victims of trafficking has tripled to 35% or one-third of all victims. Many of us have children, grandchildren, know the neighbor children or friends' children, and/or work with children. We can't imagine losing any to commercial sexual exploitation, one of the greatest evils of our day. There is no simple solution to solving this issue, especially in our technical world with social media which this article will demonstrate. Many stakeholders are finding unique and creative ways to address the issue and have found success in using AI.



STREET GRACE™

Street Grace was founded in 2008 in Norcross, Georgia.

It is a faith-driven nonprofit organization, collaborating with faith, business, and community leaders. It is led by subject matter experts, counselors, researchers, care coordinators, social workers, engineers, etc. and guided by a council of survivors who were once traumatized and will not rest until every child is safe, protected and empowered.

Their ambitious mission is to **end sexual exploitation of children** at a time when the need for this work is critical. Their innovative and creative approach is highly valued and bringing great change in how traffickers are identified and handled. **Street Grace has four focus areas:**

1. **Prevention:** training parents, youth, and caring adults.
2. **Protection:** caring for at-risk children and survivors.
3. **Policy:** shaping legislation to reduce impunity for perpetrators and better care for survivors; and
4. **Pursuit:** Leveraging the power of AI (artificial intelligence) to deter sexual predators online.

Street Grace does everything online. They are leveraging the latest innovations and technology and pioneering solutions that are smart, scalable, and effective. With the assistance of volunteer Microsoft employees who took part in a Hack for Good Event, the BBOB Advertising Agency, and law Enforcement using AI technology, they built *Transaction Intercept (TI)* to deter and disrupt predators and for use within law enforcement. Meet "**Gracie,**" an "artificial intelligence chatbot" that is being used to disrupt sexual exploitation.* Gracie intercepts men who frequent the trafficking websites. Gracie (not the child) responds to the would-be buyer predator using one

of her 112 victim personas that have been effective in revealing criminal intent. She sends these men deterrence messages indicating they are pursuing a felony, prison, and a large fine. In addition, she tells them that the conversation and information have been collected in permanent files for law enforcement. A final follow up includes a link to recovery resources for the buyer. In a mere five-month period Gracie has reached 25 states, 78 cities, exchanged more than 54,000 messages with predators, and reported more than 6,000 would-be predators to law enforcement.

Most of us know children, parents, educators, and others who could also benefit from the information and resources on this website: <https://streetgrace.org>. Don't hesitate to share the information with others. The creative use of technology is fascinating and successful in the pursuit of significantly decreasing human trafficking demand. A few short [online resources](#) include *How to Talk to Your Kids About Sex Trafficking*, *Social Media Safety Tips*, *Protecting Youth from Sexual Exploitation*, and a free video series on *Keeping Kids Safe in the Digital Age!*

*Gracie AI winner in artificial intelligence 4th Annual Shorty Social Good Awards. She fueled the single biggest verifiable study on sex trafficking ever done, helping inspire real policy change, and becoming perhaps the greatest weapon we have to fight underage sex trafficking. Statistics show that 80% of first-time buyers who are outed in this way never seek underage sex again which potentially saves multiple lives from being ruined.

Save the Date!

AAUW Iowa 2025 State Conference
Saturday, April 26th, 2025
Diamond Event Center
5307 Caraway Lane, Cedar Falls, IA 50613



Keokuk Branch Hosts Digital Media Forum Regarding Youth

Vicky Kloepper, Daily Gate City

The American Association of University Women (AAUW) hosted a forum at Keokuk Public Library on November 25, featuring a round-table discussion about the effects of digital media on youth. Speakers included: Principal Megan Davis with George Washington; Bonnie Peevler, Keokuk Board of Education member and previous psychologist; Principal Nathan Harrison from the High School; high school student Callie Leenertz; Jim Short, Keokuk Middle School principal; Kelsey Barclift, KMS counselor; Mabyn Mitchell, parent and seventh grade instructor; Alicia Logon Soper, social worker; and Jane Abell, AAUW representative and former language arts instructor. Abell presented three book resources: *The Anxious Generation*, by Jonathan Haidt; *Technology's Child*, by Katie Davis; and *The Dangers of Digital Media for Children*, by Michel Desmurget.

Audience members learned that childhood is when major neural growth happens, with maximal connections occurring by about age 5, yet with many more years needed to prune this growth into ideal configurations. Children who would formerly utilize free-play to learn self-control, patience, problem solving, and social skills cannot achieve this with mainly passive activities associated with screen-watching. Meanwhile, problems with focus, time management and emotional distress are rising. Peevler relayed that not talking about books read, and not being read to in person is problematic. She observed smaller vocabularies, with difficulties regulating emotions and communications emerging.

Parents laying technology on youngsters without proper guidance discover they generate insecure attachments matching an addiction model. Constant screen time results in perceived inability to step away, block unwanted content or turn off devices. Addictive yearning for rushes of excitement takes over as device interaction activates reward and punishment mind-paths. Kids never learn to delay gratification. Not even being able to wait in line without frustration speaks to the problem's magnitude. Soper noted kids have low frustration tolerance due to low boredom tolerance. Cutting off a device is perceived like an emergency.

With the social aspect so imbedded, kids face negative repercussions from peers when not interacting digitally. Numbers of post likes are perceived to be linked to popularity, self-esteem and self-worth.

Barclift echoed an issue of kids being up all night on devices, affecting attendance. Sometimes online conflicts create fear of going to school, with bullying an

overwhelming obstacle.

Harrison and Abell both noted that boys still have a tendency to go for the physical over the verbal, showing that females may be more vulnerable to cyberbullying. By the time parents or educators recognize a need to intervene, it can be overwhelming. Short contrasted, "there is a lot of positive that goes along with it...and taking it away does not work."

The decision to take cell phones out of the school is positively impacting relationships, time management, attitude and overall mental health. It was "the biggest change that I've seen in a good way," Short said. But bullying outside the school is still a problem, always finding a way in. A disturbing finding—kids were spending 7-9 hours daily on phones, not including schoolwork. The turning off policy leaves kids refreshed and better able to be here now.

Student Leenertz gave her own perspective, sharing that unplugging at night helps her spend more time with family and improves sleep. She sees fellow students paying attention to the schoolwork, not rushing through as they will not receive phone time as a reward, as they had in the past.

During a question-and-answer period, audience members described what they see going on today, giving strong opinions backed with evidence for why they felt one pedagogy or another would work best in creating stimulating, enriched and structured learning environments while still reaping the benefits of advanced technologies seen today. When kids turn to devices instead of human beings as a default, this could be a signal of other problems such as home issues. Being aware of both the power of devices and the power to manage them were key takeaways.



Photo by Vicky Kloepper used with permission