

# Iowa lawmakers have adjourned for the year. Here's what you need to know about the 2019 session.

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Among final bills taken up before lawmakers adjourned Saturday: An expanded medical marijuana program. More power for the governor to appoint judges.

Barbara Rodriguez and Robin Opsahl, Des Moines Register Published 2:28 p.m. CT April 27, 2019 | Updated 5:56 p.m. CT April 27, 2019

CLOSE 

Iowa is one of three states that takes away the voting rights of anyone convicted of a felony forever, Gov. Reynolds would like to restore that right. Kelsey Kremer, [kkremer@dmreg.com](mailto:kkremer@dmreg.com)

Iowa lawmakers wrapped their 2019 legislative session at 2:25 p.m Saturday, after a last-minute deal between Republicans to give GOP Gov. Kim Reynolds and future Iowa governors more power in picking Iowa Supreme Court justices.

Other legislation that passed after ricocheting between the Republican-controlled House and Senate following days of late-night debate: a health budget bill that bans use of Medicaid dollars for transgender surgery and prohibits Planned Parenthood from accessing federal dollars for sex education.

Lawmakers also approved a roughly \$7.6 billion spending plan for the budget year that begins July 1. The biggest increases included \$150 million more for private insurance companies to run the state's Medicaid program, and nearly \$3.3 billion for K-12 schools. But the Board of Regents got \$6 million less than requested to run the state's three public universities, which regents said could trigger higher tuition payments than planned.

Lawmakers also approved \$15 million to help with recovery efforts following recent flooding.

Fifteen weeks and hundreds of bills later, here are six takeaways:

## 1. Lawmakers once again turned to last-minute deals

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At the Iowa Capitol, it ain't over till it's over.

While some policy bills appeared destined to fail amid lackluster support from both chambers, legislative leaders worked behind closed doors to salvage their priorities.

Among final agreements: Republicans gave Reynolds and her successors more power in selecting members of a commission that picks finalists to the Iowa Supreme Court. If Reynolds approves the plan, she will be able to pick nine members of the so-called judicial nominating commission instead of eight, a majority. A senior justice will also no longer serve on the commission as chair, and the chief justice must be reappointed by members of the high court every two years.

Democrats like Rep. Mary Wolfe, D-Clinton and a lawyer, said: "When the people in power take advantage of that power to change the rules or change the laws, to give themselves even more power, that, ladies and gentlemen, is a power grab."

Republicans said the changes will not change the merit-based selection process for picking justices. Rep. Steven Holt, R-Denison, said: "This is not about trying to politicize the system."

Democrats chastised Republicans for tacking other policy ideas onto final budget bills, which the minority party claimed circumvented the usual legislative process. House Republicans took an unusual procedural move to force an end to floor debate by Saturday afternoon.

## 2. One-party control isn't a guarantee bills will pass

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Republicans enjoy a trifecta of control in both chambers of the Legislature and the governor's office, and they used that power to pass priorities like [a campus free speech bill](#) and an ["ag gag" bill](#), which is already ensnared [in a lawsuit](#).

But it didn't guarantee all the wins Republicans were looking for this session.

Over and over, Republican leaders had to either toss bills or compromise. Legislation to [expand the use of guns in courthouses, schools and around the workplace](#) failed; a bill [to use public dollars for private schooling](#) didn't advance; and [an expansive elections bill](#) was considerably narrowed.

One reality hindering Republicans: Their majority in the 100-member House has shrunk since last year, from 59 to 53, including the abrupt exit of [Rep. Andy McKean to the Democratic Party](#) in the session's last week. The dwindling majority potentially gives moderate Republicans more sway, while others look ahead to the next election.

## 3. Speaking up made a difference

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It's not unusual for ordinary citizens to contact lawmakers to either protest or support legislation. In several instances, it paid off.

A bill that would allow Iowa's public utilities to charge additional fees to new solar customers created [unusual allies](#), ultimately preventing it from reaching Reynolds' desk. [Legislators also massively scaled back a property tax bill](#) after local government officials fought back on

proposals that would have required a voter referendum and a hard cap on how much they could raise taxes.

There was also behind-the-scenes push-back on a "religious freedom" bill that critics warned would allow businesses in the state to refuse services to someone based on religious beliefs.

Rep. Kristin Sunde, a freshman Democrat from West Des Moines, said the public appeared very tuned in with the policy ideas moving through the chambers.

"Snail mail, email, personal visits. I just heard from all over the state," she said. "I'm pretty amazed by how full my inbox was every day."

## 4. Reynolds didn't get everything she wanted

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When Reynolds gave her Condition of the State address in January, she told lawmakers she wanted them to begin the years-long process of changing the Iowa Constitution to restore voting rights for felons who complete their sentences.

The idea fizzled, at least this session. A Republican-led Senate committee failed to take up the proposal, despite nearly unanimous support in the House.

Another priority for the governor, to expand birth control access, advanced in the Senate, but failed to catch on in the House.

In contrast, Reynolds gained bipartisan support to pass her proposals to establish a children's mental health program and the Future Ready Iowa Act, intended to train workers for evolving, high-demand careers.

## 5. Medical marijuana program expands at the last minute — again

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Once again, changes to Iowa's medical marijuana program advanced in the 11th hour of the session.

The Senate passed a bill on Saturday that removes a 3% limit on THC, the chemical that makes recreational users high. It replaces it with a cap of 25 grams for every 90-day period, which the House advanced last month.

"I give you my word: This is not a step in the direction of recreational use of marijuana," Sen. Brad Zaun, R-Urbandale said on the chamber floor. "It's a step to help people who have a lot of pain."

While medical marijuana manufacturers and distributors were happy with the change — having criticized the THC limit for reducing pain relief effectiveness in their drugs — a medical marijuana advisory board of licensed physicians opposed the expansion. Disagreements between lobbyists and doctors delayed progress before the Senate ultimately moved ahead with the legislation, against the board's recommendations. The bill heads to Reynolds.

## 6. Limits on attorney general could end up in court

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In the final days of session, Republicans approved a last-minute measure that would require the state attorney general to effectively seek permission to join out-of-state lawsuits.

Republicans have been unhappy that Iowa Attorney General Tom Miller, a Democrat, has taken legal action against President Donald Trump's administration over issues like separating families on the southern U.S. border and requiring citizenship information in the 2020 census.

The proposal, added to a budget bill, now heads to Reynolds, who has not indicated where she stands on the action. If she approves the restriction, it could trigger a court challenge, as a similar limit on the Wisconsin attorney general has.

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