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IOWA HOSPITALITY ADVOCATE

FALL 2025

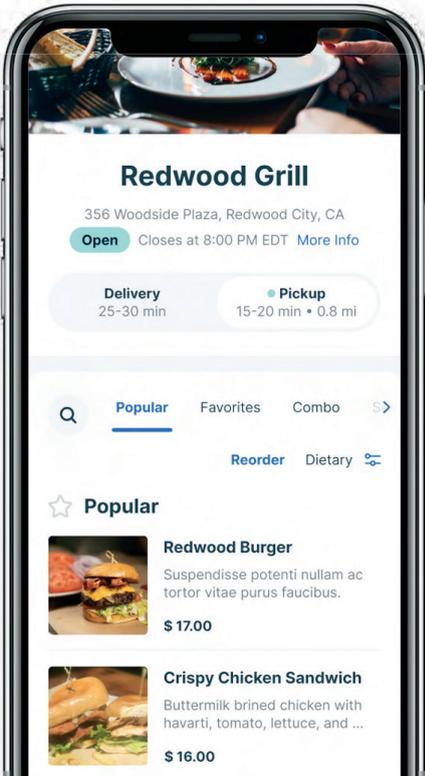


Iowa Hotel & Lodging Association
Innovator of the Year
Kim Whalen
Heart of America Group

INSIDE: Iowa Hotel Industry Award Winners & Annual Hospitality Industry Partner Guide

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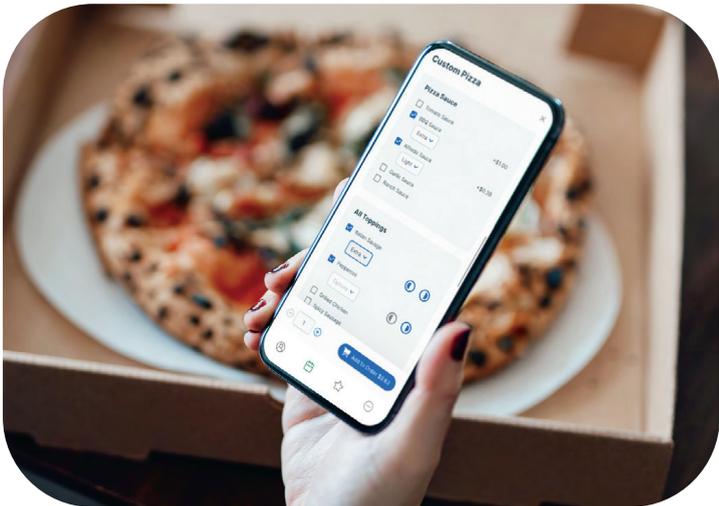


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CONTENT:

SECOND ISSUE | Fall 2025

- 4 **Letter from the Editor**
- 6 **Cover Story:** The People Who Innovate, Elevate, and Define Excellence
- 7 **Hotelier of the Year:** Paul Rottenberg
- 10 **Innovator of the Year:** Kim Whalen
- 12 **Hotel Executive Team Member of the Year:** Amy Mortensen
- 14 **General Manager of the Year:** Kari Smith
- 16 **Sustainability Award Winner:** Hotel Pommier
- 18 **Champion of the Year:** Kirkwood Community College Hospitality Management Program
- 20 **Legislator of the Year:** Senator Carrie Koelker
- 22 **Employee of the Year:** Wenjin Richardson
- 23 **Annual Hospitality Industry Partner Guide**
- 31 **Federal Executive Actions Begin Reshaping Hospitality Industry**

IOWA HOSPITALITY ADVOCATE

Iowa Hospitality Advocate is the official publication of the: Iowa Restaurant Association, Iowa Restaurant Association Education Foundation, Iowa Hotel & Lodging Association and Iowa Latino Hospitality Council.

It is produced three times a year and is distributed to hospitality industry professionals across the state of Iowa. Editorial features cover business, legislative, and other trends impacting Iowa members & proprietors.

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Letter from the Editor

Welcome to the latest issue of Iowa Hospitality Advocate! This edition highlights the individuals who define excellence in Iowa's hotel and lodging industry. From innovators driving change to employees exemplifying "Iowa nice" for decades, these honorees represent the very best of Iowa's hotel and lodging community.

At the same time, we know our industry continues to face challenges—slower customer traffic, economic uncertainty, and the pressures that come with rising costs. Yet time and again, Iowa's hospitality operators show resilience. Hotels and restaurants alike keep finding new ways to serve guests and strengthen their communities.

This summer, we've spent time meeting with Iowa lawmakers as well as our congressional delegation, sharing our industry's impact, challenges, and opportunities. These conversations matter because lawmakers are hearing directly from people in our industry. It's your stories, experiences, and realities that carry the most weight with policymakers.

As we celebrate this year's honorees, we also recognize the importance of those who make this work possible. Our Buyers Guide features the partners and companies that choose to invest in these associations—and by doing so, in you. Supporting them matters, because their membership and sponsorship dollars are what allow us to advocate for the industry and deliver the resources you'll find in these pages.

Together, the Iowa Restaurant Association, Iowa Hotel & Lodging Association, and Iowa Latino Hospitality Council continue to protect, promote, educate, and advocate on behalf of the entire hospitality community. To our current members—thank you for standing with us. If you're not yet a member, I encourage you to join us. Membership connects you to industry peers, gives you a voice in policy conversations, and ensures you have access to the resources and advocacy that strengthen our businesses



A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jessica Dunker". The signature is fluid and stylized, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Jessica Dunker
President & CEO
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Honoring the People Who Innovate, Elevate, and Define Excellence in Iowa Hotel & Lodging

This is the third year the Iowa Hotel & Lodging Association has come together to recognize the individuals and teams who set the standard for excellence in our state's hotel and lodging industry. The 2025 honorees represent a wide range of achievements—from innovation and sustainability to years of dedicated service and exceptional leadership.

Nominated by colleagues and peers, these winners were selected for the ways they elevate both their properties and the industry as a whole. Each was honored at a celebratory event in October. Their stories highlight what makes Iowa's hotels and lodging businesses unique: a deep commitment to service, a strong connection to community, and a constant drive to improve the guest experience.

As you read the following pages, you'll see that these awards are about more than recognition. They celebrate the heart of the Iowa hotel and lodging industry—the people whose vision, perseverance, and care for others define excellence.

We are proud to share their stories with you in the pages ahead. See the Iowa Hotel & Lodging Association Facebook and LinkedIn pages for event photos and visit the IHLA's YouTube channel for a video feature on each winner.

HOTELIER OF THE YEAR

Paul Rottenberg, Orchestrate Hospitality | Des Moines



For over 30 years, Paul Rottenberg has been one of central Iowa's most influential hospitality leaders—known for breathing new life into landmark hotels and venues, developing successful new properties, and helping define the character of downtown Des Moines.

His hotel career began in 1987 at the historic Hotel Fort Des Moines, where he was brought on to help launch a restaurant. This soon assumed responsibility for the hotel's food and beverage operations, from restaurants and room service to banquets. From there, he moved into broader leadership roles, eventually serving as general manager for more than a decade. That experience prepared him to launch his own management company, Orchestrate Hospitality, positioning him to help elevate downtown's hospitality landscape.

Paul founded Orchestrate in 2001. Its first client was the Hotel Fort Des Moines, and the company soon expanded into development, building the Hilton Garden Inn Des Moines/Urbandale and the Holiday Inn Express and Suites in Altoona, both of which it continues to manage. Orchestrate also developed TownePlace Suites in Urbandale and revitalized and managed the Gateway Hotel & Conference Center in Ames. Beyond hotels, Paul has been behind some of Des Moines' most visible independent restaurants, including

Centro, Django, Gateway Market, and Zombie Burger, as well as managing the renovation and then operation of the Temple for Performing Arts, one of downtown's most beautiful event venues.

At his core, Paul is a builder. He has overseen new construction, navigated financing challenges, and guided renovations that give properties renewed character and purpose. He often notes that hotels are capital-intensive businesses requiring planning, reinvestment, and steady management—principles that have kept his properties strong through changing markets. He is equally committed to people, both inside his company and in the community. Many of his team members have been with him for decades, a reflection of the culture he has built on transparency and fairness. That same philosophy extends outward through Orchestrate's support of organizations that feed and house people—and investments in the arts, which Paul believes are essential to strong communities.

Paul has been recognized by many central Iowa organizations for his leadership and philanthropy and has served on numerous local boards, including as a founding board member of the Iowa Hotel & Lodging Association and as a director of the Des Moines Convention and Visitors Bureau.

For more than three decades, Paul Rottenberg has combined vision, steadiness, and community commitment to shape Iowa's hotel industry. That record of development, management, and stewardship is why he is the 2025 Iowa Hotel & Lodging Association Hotelier of the Year. A special thank you to Iowa Hotel & Lodging Association partner Ecolab for sponsoring this award.

INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR

Kim Whalen, Heart of America Group | Des Moines



Kim Whalen has spent more than four decades shaping the visual identity and design strategy of Heart of America Group—helping grow the Iowa-based company from a single restaurant into a portfolio of 20 hotels and 25+ restaurants across multiple states.

Her path back to Iowa began with a temporary return from California to care for an ill parent. She took what she thought would be a short-term accounting job at the company's first restaurant, the Machine Shed. Mike Whalen, also home temporarily from the East Coast, had similar plans. Instead, they met, stayed in the state, married, and built one of Iowa's most successful hospitality companies.

As Executive Vice President and Head of Design, Kim leads the company's in-house team of designers and architects. She's especially drawn to boutique hotels, where she and her team have the creative freedom to shape every element of the guest experience. Her designs balance beauty, function, and efficiency. At REVEL, for example, she envisioned cowhide chairs no one sold—so she bought rugs and found a craftsman who could build them.

Kim's work reflects her deep respect for the Midwest. She often

incorporates locally inspired materials, regional art, and subtle nods to place. Her design philosophy favors timelessness over trends and functionality over flash. She's energized by the challenge of transforming existing properties and isn't afraid to take design risks when the experience calls for it.

Her collaborative style has built a design team that's been with her for decades. She finds talent in unexpected places—a retail merchandiser, a hotel employee, a working artist—and places people where their strengths can thrive. That, she says, is Heart of America's "secret sauce."

Ask Kim to pick a favorite project and she can't—she loves them all for different reasons. She still smiles remembering the paper cutout pattern she once sent for fabrication to create quilts for an early property. 3D modeling tools now bring nearly every part of her vision to life.

That commitment to creating beauty with purpose, elevating the guest experience, honoring local character, and thoughtfully considering every detail is why Kim Whalen is the 2025 Iowa Hotel & Lodging Association Innovator of the Year.

The background of the top section is a photograph of a large-scale agricultural irrigation system. A long, arched metal structure supported by numerous vertical posts spans across a vast, green field. The system is actively spraying water, creating a fine mist over the crops. The sky is a clear, light blue.

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HOTEL EXECUTIVE TEAM MEMBER OF THE YEAR

Amy Mortensen, VKB Management | Johnston



When Amy Mortensen left a career in advertising to take a front desk job at the Super 8 in Newton in 2001, she couldn't have known it would set the course for her professional life. More than two decades later, she is at VKB Management's Central Office serving as Payroll and HR Manager for the company's portfolio of 15 hotels.

Amy's path has been anything but easy. In 2007, she was widowed at the age of 28, left to raise three young daughters while continuing her work and education. She remarried six years ago, the same year she faced a cancer battle. Through it all, she leaned on the support of VKB's owners and team, who truly wrapped their arms around her during that difficult time. Their compassion left a lasting impression, and Amy now works to model that same care in both her professional and personal life.

She eventually earned her degree from DMACC while continuing to grow within VKB, taking on new responsibilities and mastering every aspect of hotel operations. A lifelong learner, she still pursues continuing education, always looking for ways to sharpen her skills and strengthen the teams she supports. Numbers, she says, "tell a story," and her ability to read those stories has made her an invaluable asset in payroll and HR.

But it's her people skills that make her stand out. Like those who once invested in her, she now invests in others—encouraging young managers, offering second chances, and guiding employees across the portfolio. She is known for her fairness, her willingness to pitch in on any task, and her belief that the best customer service starts with the best staff support.

Her influence is evident in results: VKB properties consistently post turnover rates significantly below industry averages. The company has also earned awards for customer service and overall performance. Amy herself has been recognized with the Pride of Super 8 honor twice, VKB's Employee of the Year award, and multiple brand and performance accolades.

Ask Amy why she has stayed in hospitality, and the answer is simple: she loves it. She often tells her children she's never had a day she didn't want to come to work. For her, hospitality is family—both at home and at the hotel.

For her resilience, her dedication to her team, and her lasting impact on Iowa hospitality, Amy Mortensen is the 2025 Iowa Hotel & Lodging Association Hotel Executive Team Member of the Year.

GENERAL MANAGER OF THE YEAR

Kari Smith, Best Western Plus | Waterloo



Five years ago, Kari Smith helped guide the conversion of a downtown Waterloo property into the Best Western Plus Executive Residency, and since then she has shaped it into one of the region's strongest hotels. With 171 rooms connected by skywalk to the Waterloo Convention Center, the property serves everyone from corporate travelers and convention guests to families and long-term residents. Under Kari's leadership, it has become known not only for reliable operations, but also for a warm, welcoming culture that guests and staff alike appreciate.

Kari has a long hospitality background—starting as a restaurant server and moving through the ranks of multiple hotels. In every role, she has looked to learn more, and that curiosity has carried her into leadership. Having worked nearly every position, she leads by example. She is as comfortable folding laundry or making a bed as she is working on revenue strategy or building community partnerships. That hands-on style has earned her the respect of her team, who describe her as fair, steady, and approachable. It has also helped her build one of the lowest turnover rates among the 14 hotels in her management group—a testament to her focus on culture and people.

She has guided the hotel through challenges with resilience, from navigating COVID-19 disruptions to establishing brand standards in a large, full-service property. Her philosophy is simple: every guest should leave feeling their stay was worth the choice to be here.

That is especially true for extended-stay travelers, who rely on her team to make the hotel feel like home.

Downtown Waterloo itself has seen new energy in recent years, with attractions like the Iowa Woo arena football team adding excitement to the district. Kari has made sure her hotel is part of that momentum. Whether it's fans in town for a game, business travelers at the convention center, or families on extended stays, guests often remark on the sense of home her team creates—turning a stay of days or even weeks into something personal and welcoming.

Her work has not gone unnoticed. The hotel has earned multiple brand honors, and her colleagues often point to her as a mentor who gives people opportunities to grow, just as she once did.

By combining operational excellence, people-first leadership, and community engagement, Kari Smith has set a high bar for hospitality in Waterloo. That record makes her the 2025 Iowa Hotel & Lodging Association General Manager of the Year.



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SUSTAINABILITY AWARD

Hotel Pommier | Chariton



Sustainability in hospitality often brings to mind cutting-edge technology or high-profile initiatives. At the Hotel Pommier in Chariton, it looks a little different. The family-owned property, once a Super 8, has been thoughtfully renovated with a practical approach: repurpose what can be reused, invest in energy-saving technology, and create spaces that serve both guests and the community.

That philosophy shows up everywhere. During renovation, mattresses, microwaves, refrigerators, furniture, and linens were donated or sold rather than sent to the landfill. New LED lighting, motion sensors, energy efficient windows, and modern PTACS reduce energy use by as much as 30 percent. An innovative filtered water station replaces in-room coffee makers and minimizes plastic bottle waste, giving guests a fresh, convenient amenity while cutting down on disposable products. Even outdoor updates reflect sustainability: parking lot lights were replaced with efficient timed LEDs, and an EV charging station was added to make the property a welcoming stop for travelers.

For owner Pritesh Patel, sustainability isn't about marketing—it's about responsibility. "If something can be reused, donated, or given a second life, that's good for the environment, good for the

community, and good for the business," he says. That mindset has turned the renovation into a case study in small-town ingenuity, where saving money and caring for the environment go hand in hand.

The guest experience reflects the same values. The front parking lot was reimaged as a patio with a pickleball court, fire pit, hot tub, and grilling area—an investment that not only transformed unused pavement into green space, but also gave locals a reason to gather at the hotel. Inside, guests find custom Iowa-inspired details, from coat racks engraved with the state outline to artwork by local photographers. Every choice reinforces the hotel's role as both a sustainable business and a community hub.

Hotel Pommier's commitment to sustainability is steady, intentional, and deeply connected to its community. By combining smart technology, repurposed materials, and community-minded design, they have created more than a renovated building—they've built a hotel that reflects the future of Iowa hospitality. That vision is why the Hotel Pommier in Chariton is the 2025 Iowa Hotel & Lodging Association Sustainability Award winner. A special thank you to Iowa Hotel & Lodging Association partner WoodRiver Energy for sponsoring this award.

CHAMPION OF THE YEAR

Kirkwood Community College Hospitality Management Program | Cedar Rapids



Few programs have done more to elevate the profession of hospitality in Iowa than Kirkwood Community College's Hospitality Management Program. Guided by professor and program coordinator Dr. Greg Krawiec, the program is built on the belief that the best leaders understand every part of the hotel. That vision has produced graduates who enter the industry confident, capable, and eager to build careers in Iowa.

The program's centerpiece is The Hotel at Kirkwood Center, a one-of-a-kind AAA Four Diamond teaching hotel where students learn in a full-service environment. Over the course of more than 500 clinical hours, students rotate through housekeeping, food and beverage, sales, catering, and event management—learning directly from working professionals who act as both mentors and educators. The philosophy is simple: every employee is a teacher, and every guest interaction is a lesson.

This approach ensures that by the time students graduate, they don't just understand hospitality in theory—they've lived it. Each completes two internships: one with a hospitality partner anywhere in the world, and another in a leadership role at The Hotel at Kirkwood Center.

In their final semester, students serve as resident manager on duty, experiencing the full scope of a general manager's responsibility. The result are graduates who have already faced real-world decisions and know how to deliver results under pressure.

For Iowa's hotel industry, this model is invaluable. It creates a steady pipeline of talent trained in best practices yet grounded in the culture of service that defines hospitality. Many Kirkwood graduates stay in Iowa, quickly taking on supervisory and management roles in hotels, country clubs, casinos, and event venues across the state. By blending academic rigor with practical experience, the program not only raises the bar for professional education but also strengthens the long-term health of the industry.

The program's impact is amplified through national conference participation, study-abroad experiences, and transfer pathways to four-year institutions such as Iowa State and Florida International University. But at its core, the mission remains clear: to prepare students to succeed—and to show them a future in Iowa hospitality.

For its innovative model, its commitment to student success, and its lasting contributions to the state's hotels and tourism economy, the Kirkwood Community College Hospitality Management Program is the 2025 Iowa Hotel & Lodging Association Champion.



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LEGISLATOR OF THE YEAR

Senator Carrie Koelker | District 33

Few legislators bring a deeper understanding of Iowa's hospitality and tourism industry to the statehouse than Senator Carrie Koelker. A lifelong Iowan, Koelker has spent her career promoting travel, tourism, and economic development—first as Executive Director of the Eastern Iowa Tourism Association, now as Vice President of Community Engagement at Travel Dubuque, and since 2018, as a member of the Iowa Senate.

In the legislature, Koelker has been a tireless advocate for tourism funding, understanding firsthand the economic ripple effect of overnight stays. She serves on the Senate Appropriations Committee and has used her influence to secure greater investment in hospitality priorities.

Most notably, she helped advance the Iowa Major Events and Tourism Program, a competitive grant fund designed to help communities attract major concerts, sporting events, conventions, and festivals—tying tourism investment directly to hotel occupancy and visitor spending.

She has also been a strong voice for hotels on issues of tax fairness. Koelker was instrumental in jumpstarting legislative conversations around a bill to exempt essential lodging supplies—such as toiletries, towels, bottled water, and cleaning products—from double taxation. While the bill did not move forward late in session, her leadership helped bring new attention to the issue and created momentum for continued action.

Her influence extends well beyond the Senate floor. As an Assistant Majority Leader, she plays a key role in shaping Iowa's economic development agenda, and her commitment to hospitality is reinforced by her long engagement with statewide industry organizations. She has served on the boards of Iowa Tourism Industry Partners, the Iowa Economic Development Authority, the Iowa Finance Authority, and Enhance Iowa, and she has been honored by hospitality and tourism groups across the state for her decades of advocacy.

That combination of hotel-focused advocacy, statewide leadership, and personal passion for Iowa's hospitality and tourism industry is why Senator Carrie Koelker is the 2025 Iowa Hotel & Lodging Association Legislator of the Year. A special thank you to Iowa Hotel & Lodging Association partner Asian-America Hotel Owners Association for sponsoring this award.



EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR

Wenjin Richardson, Hyatt Regency | Coralville



For nearly 20 years, the team at Hyatt Regency Coralville Hotel & Conference Center has considered Wenjin Richardson the heartbeat of the hotel. A former teacher and school administrator, she immigrated from China in 2006. With limited English, she was thankful for the chance to start in housekeeping—and even more thankful for coworkers who were patient and kind. Most of her family had settled on the East Coast and worried about her moving to the middle of the country with little support. But Wenjin embraced Iowa’s quiet, its safety, and the welcoming people who helped her feel at home. Today, as the property’s barista, she embodies that same spirit and is one of its most beloved team members.

Her gift is connection. She remembers names and favorite drinks, often handing a regular order to a patron before it’s spoken. One guest receiving medical treatment shared that her care brought comfort during a difficult time. A local sales executive who frequently stays at the hotel often says she makes his matcha “with love.” She is also often mentioned in online reviews, which echo the same themes: her smile, her kindness, and the way she makes every person feel valued.

Wenjin’s contributions go well beyond the café counter. When the hotel changed flags and management groups, she quietly took it upon herself to shampoo every guestroom carpet—just one example of how she steps in wherever help is needed. She also brings her love of plants and gardens to work, volunteering to plant flowers outside the entrance. She enjoys seeing them from her spot at the café, knowing guests notice them too. Her care extends to the community around the hotel—neighbors stop in regularly and football weekends bring back familiar faces she greets like old friends. Even guests who have moved away return to see her, often calling her the face of Iowa City hospitality.

Her teammates describe Wenjin as “the glue that holds this place together.” She is known for her energy, her steadiness, and her ability to lift spirits during the busiest mornings. Her story is woven into the hotel itself—she even met her husband there, training him in housekeeping before he became Director of Engineering.

For her warmth, her devotion to guests and colleagues, and nearly two decades of excellence, Wenjin Richardson is the 2025 Iowa Hotel & Lodging Association Employee of the Year.

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Hospitality Industry Partner Guide: Trusted Resources for Restaurants & Hotels

The Iowa Restaurant Association and the Iowa Hotel & Lodging Association exist to protect, promote, educate, and advocate for the state's hospitality industry. Our work at the Capitol, in classrooms, and across communities is made possible not only by restaurants and hotels, but also by the allied businesses that pay dues to support the industry they serve.

This guide highlights those companies. They are more than vendors — they are partners who believe in the strength of Iowa's hospitality community. Most are locally owned, led by neighbors who live, work, and invest right here in our towns and cities. Supporting them means supporting the future of hospitality in Iowa.

To our allied members — thank you for standing with Iowa's restaurants and hotels. Your investment helps keep our industry strong.

SUN'S UP



2025 HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: Partner Guide

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(515) 314-6990

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Iowa City, IA 52240
(319) 337-9637

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Des Moines, IA 50316
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Ankeny, IA 50023
(515) 334-1082

Iowa Gaming Association
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LeMars, IA 51031
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Des Moines, IA 50309
(515) 252-6762

Midstates Marketing
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Urbandale, IA 50322
(515) 246-8829

New Eagle Insurance
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Dubuque, IA 52002
(563) 582-5834

North Central NATO
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(612) 986-7436

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Plymouth, MN 55446
(612) 710-7106

North Country Processing
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Clear Lake, IA 50428
(641) 860-1195

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West Des Moines, IA 50266
515-555-5555

Payteva
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Federal Executive Actions Reshape Hospitality in Real Time as Iowa Operators Share Concerns



Federal policy usually takes time to filter down to Iowa's restaurants and hotels, but executive orders and new regulations are now reshaping daily operations in ways the industry cannot ignore. Throughout the summer, members of Iowa's hospitality community met with our congressional delegation to highlight how these issues are affecting operators across the state.

Work Permits for Immigrants

Labor shortages remain a defining challenge for restaurants and hotels. After a summer of stressing the urgency of workforce solutions, hospitality leaders again underscored to Iowa's congressional delegation the need for the Essential Workers for Economic Advancement Act (EWEA). The proposal would create a new H-2C visa program to help fill long-vacant jobs and, importantly, would separate the need for work permits from the longer timeline of comprehensive immigration reform. The National Restaurant Association has been leading this effort nationally, and Iowa members added their voices to highlight the impact on local operators.

Tariffs Impact on Hospitality

Rising food and supply costs remain a front-line issue. Iowa operators shared with lawmakers how tariffs are increasing prices on products that can't be sourced locally—items like coffee, spices, and seafood. The September 8 executive order introduced possible exemptions for goods the U.S. cannot produce in sufficient supply, offering limited relief. But the framework is uncertain, with trade policy still under legal review by the Supreme Court this fall. The message from Iowa was clear: reliable access and predictable pricing are essential to keeping menus affordable and expansion projects viable.

No Tax on Tips

The initial announcement of the No Tax on Tips provision created confusion, as no clear implementation guidance was provided. Employers were placed in a difficult position when employees assumed the policy meant an end to withholding, rather than a future tax credit. After a summer of pressing for clarity, the new Treasury guidance is welcome. It confirms that workers may deduct up to \$25,000 per year in qualified tips (2025–2028), provided the payment is voluntary and not a mandatory service charge. Iowa operators emphasized to lawmakers that clear, consistent rules are essential to avoid workplace misunderstandings and to ensure employees are able to fully realize the benefit of the credit.

MAHA Impact on Restaurants

The Make America Healthy Again strategy outlines more than 120 actions on nutrition and chronic disease. In conversations with policymakers, Iowa operators flagged potential concerns. Smaller restaurants, in particular, could face significant costs and compliance challenges if changes to labeling or ingredient rules move forward. The message was clear: any new requirements must be workable for local businesses, not just large national chains.

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