



July 2025

Summer Sizzle!

On a few particularly hot days this summer, you may be convinced you can fry an egg on the pavement. Fortunately those days are rare, and summertime in Iowa offers any number of opportunities to enjoy spending time outside with friends and family.

This issue of the *Healthy State of Iowa Employees* newsletter highlights some of the activities we enjoy most this time of year, including opportunities to make a difference in your community.



Move Your Body, Boost Your Mood—An Adventure Guide

Summer's almost perfect weather makes it ideal to explore Iowa's natural beauty while staying active. Regular physical activity improves both physical and mental health, and Iowa offers outdoor opportunities for all fitness levels—from hiking scenic trails to paddling peaceful rivers.

The [Iowa Department of Natural Resources \(DNR\)](#) provides comprehensive "Things to Do" and "Places to Go" resources with interactive maps to help you discover destinations like the High Trestle Trail Bridge, Backbone State Park's limestone bluffs, or the Iowa Great Lakes region.

Start with a weekend visit to a nearby state park. Stay hydrated, check weather conditions, and visit the Iowa DNR website to begin planning your next healthy adventure today.



Tips for a Healthy Summer Diet

July, when gardens and farmers' markets abound with summer harvests, is a great time to add more fruits and vegetables to our meals.

Experts recommend a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, whole grains, and healthy fats. Most people have heard of the Mediterranean diet, and there are others like the

DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diet that offer health benefits as well as weight management.

Also popular are fad diets such as the paleo diet, the keto diet, the carnivore diet and juice cleanses which typically promise fast weight loss with little effort. These types of eating plans restrict specific foods and food groups and don't focus on lifestyle changes that are necessary to keep weight off. Even if a person loses weight quickly, it is usually regained just as quickly. Fad diets aren't sustainable, nor are they enjoyable.

If you are wondering how a balanced diet should work for you, you can connect with a registered dietitian to receive specialized nutrition education. Ashley Danielson, a registered dietitian working for Iowa HHS Division of Aging and Disability Services and the Nutrition and Aging Resource Center, encourages visiting <https://www.eatright.org/find-a-nutrition-expert> to find a registered and licensed dietitian to help you. Registered dietitians work in a variety of settings, such as hospitals, in private practice, and in some grocery stores.

Danielson also talks with her clients about their relationship with food and mindful eating. She says if we aren't focused on eating, we eat too fast, don't chew food well enough to break it down, and therefore don't enjoy the food with all of our senses. She recommends visiting the website of the [Ellyn Satter Institute](https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/) for information on how to transform meals into joyful, healthful and struggle-free events.



Staff Spotlight

Name: Justinian Wurtzel, MSc

Current Position: Viral Hepatitis Surveillance Coordinator (Epidemiologist), Bureau of HIV, STI, and Hepatitis

Years with State: 4 years

My Healthy Choice: Strength training

"During the pandemic, I was working as an epidemiologist in an isolated town in Northwestern Ontario Canada. I had lost nearly 50 pounds, mostly from stress, poor diet, chronic sleep deprivation, and bad habits. When I returned to the US I trained inconsistently and the poor habits continued to manifest. This contributed to a rapid weight gain followed by a gnarly hiking injury requiring a prescribed opiate.

After months of unsuccessful physical therapy, I pivoted into strength training. I worked with a personal trainer at DSM Barbell¹ who identified muscle weakness along with my immobility, and successfully got me off of opiates. Since then I've continued my strength journey, trying strongman lifts, Olympic lifting, and now powerlifting. These efforts have helped me build more muscle and become more athletic than I have ever been. The commitment and consistency of a personal trainer to keep me accountable has been one of the best decisions of my life.

When you start to look at the research, there are numerous scientific publications on the benefits of

building strength. These might include muscles acting like sponges to keep glucose balanced², increased quadricep mass to prevent age-related falls and fractures³, bone strength⁴, brain health⁵, heart health⁶, much more.”

References

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Family Time with a Purpose: How Volunteering Strengthens Bonds

Volunteering as a family (or with a mentee) offers a unique opportunity to strengthen relationships while giving back to the community. When you volunteer together, you share meaningful experiences that foster communication, collaboration, and empathy. Whether you're participating in a local cleanup, serving a meal, or sorting donations, volunteering allows families to work as a team toward a common goal.



This shared effort helps build stronger bonds, teaching valuable life lessons along the way. For children, volunteering provides an opportunity to learn about responsibility, compassion, and the importance of helping others. It can also be a fun and engaging way to spend quality time together, creating lasting memories and family traditions.

Volunteering as a family helps reinforce values of kindness and community, and shows kids the importance of giving back. It also encourages teamwork and teaches problem-solving skills as family members work together to achieve goals. Volunteering can even become a rewarding tradition that helps your family stay connected and involved in the community for years to come.

Here's a family challenge for you this summer: find a volunteer opportunity in which your whole family can participate, and make it a regular part of your family time!

Emergency Savings: Your Financial Safety Net

Whether it's unexpected vehicle maintenance, a broken AC unit, or a sick pet, we have all experienced life's surprises that leave us scrambling financially. This is why having an emergency fund is so important.



What is an Emergency Fund?

An emergency fund is a savings account specifically set aside to cover unexpected expenses or financial emergencies. Think of it as a financial safety net that can give you peace of mind and help you avoid getting into debt.

Why it Matters

No matter how carefully you plan, unexpected expenses can still catch you off guard. Having an emergency fund is the foundation for future financial resilience.

Here is why it is so important:

- **Avoid Debt:** Without funds set aside, you may be forced to resort to taking on more debt. This can make an already unaffordable event more expensive.
- **Rising cost of living:** As costs for housing, gas, and groceries increase, even small unexpected costs can throw off your budget.
- **Peace of mind:** Knowing you're financially prepared reduces stress and turns what could be a financially devastating event into nothing more than an inconvenience.

How Much Should You Save?

Experts typically recommend three to six months of expenses, but don't let that discourage you. Start small:

- **Goal 1:** \$500
- **Goal 2:** One month of expenses
- **Goal 3:** Three months and beyond

Reaching this three to six month goal takes time, but don't underestimate the impact of smaller savings. If you've saved \$500 and face a \$400 car repair, you'll be grateful for every dollar.

How to Build Your Emergency Fund

- **Start small, stay consistent:** Even \$25 per paycheck adds up over time.
- **Automate it:** Set up an automatic transfer to a separate savings account.
- **Optimize Cost of Living Adjustment:** Allocate a portion of any extra income directly to your emergency fund.
- **Eliminate waste in budget:** Cut underutilized memberships and subscription services. Plan your meals and trips to the grocery store to limit food waste.

Where to Keep It

Your emergency fund should be easily accessible but separate from your checking account. Consider something like a high-yield savings account. This keeps funds available when needed, but not too easy to dip into for non-emergencies.

Visit [Building My Emergency Savings Pathway | Iowa Insurance Division](#) for practical tips and tools to help get you started.

Well-Being Webinars Offer Wealth of Information

Do you suffer from back pain? If so, you won't want to miss the latest on-demand webinar from WebMD®. You'll learn small lifestyle changes that can help you address your back pain. Key takeaways include:

- Knowledge of how the spin is designed and how it functions
- Types of back pain, risk factors, and ideas for prevention
- Exercises to improve back strength.

[Register now and watch at your convenience.](#)

Take Action!

- **Iowa's Annual Healthiest State Walk Event**, October 1, 2025. Register at <https://www.iowahealthieststate.com/events/annual-walk/>. This year's event includes live music and fun at the walk celebration.
 - **Healthiest State Initiative 1-Mile Walk Presented by HealthPartners**, October 19 at the IMT Des Moines Marathon. This is a new family-friendly walk for all ages and abilities, available in person or virtually.
 - Wherever you are in your mental health journey, the State of Iowa offers tools and benefits to support you and your family. In collaboration with Wellmark, DAS has three guides to assist you, your family, and those of you who work in a supervisory capacity:
 - [Healthy Everywhere Guide for Employees](#) - A guide to building better mental health at work and home.
 - [Healthy at Work Guide for Leaders](#) - A leader's guide that outlines important information to help you support employee well-being at work, at home and everywhere in between.
 - [Healthy at Home Parents' Guide](#) - A guide to supporting your child's mental health.
 - [SEHARC](#) (State of Iowa Health and Recreation Committee) connects you with offers for discounted tickets to area events and hosts fun activities throughout the year. If you are interested in receiving information on these opportunities, complete [this form](#) to be added to SEHARC's mailing list or follow them on Facebook!
 - Check out the DAS [Employee Assistance Program](#) (EAP) for a number of on-demand seminars covering various topics related to health and well-being. EAP also offers confidential resources at no cost to help employees and eligible family members address challenges.
 - For more great information, be sure to check out these Wellmark publications - [Wellmark Blue Magazine](#) and [Blue at Work](#).
 - To learn more about how Healthy EmployeesSM Powered by Wellmark is working with the State of Iowa to make the healthy choices easier for you, visit the [Healthy Employees](#) website.
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The Healthy State of Iowa Employees quarterly newsletter is a cooperative effort between the Department of Administrative Services, Wellmark, and the State of Iowa Wellness Champions' Education and Engagement Committee. It's designed to help keep State of Iowa employees connected and informed of wellness opportunities around the state.

If you have questions or suggestions for future content, please contact us at healthyemployees@iowa.gov.