

Plan B

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“While not required by Iowa law, the victim compensation fund has previously paid for Plan B and abortions. As a part of her top-down, bottom-up audit of victim assistance, Attorney General Bird is carefully evaluating whether this is an appropriate use of public funds,” Brouillet said in a statement Friday. “That audit is ongoing. Until that review is complete, payment of these pending claims will be delayed.”

Brouillet did not indicate when Bird would make that decision but said the audit will likely be completed in the near future.

Under Miller, who held office for 40 years, the cost of emergency contraception for sexual assault victims was covered as part of the state’s Sexual Assault Examination Payment Program.

The compensation fund is used to directly cover the expenses facing assault survivors who seek medical help, including the costs of forensic examinations and treatments for sexually transmitted infections, regardless of whether or not they report their assault to law enforcement.

However, the law that requires states to cover these costs makes no mention of compensation for contraceptives.

Still, Miller made it a policy to compensate health care providers for the cost of dispensing morning-after pills for victims who requested medication to prevent a pregnancy. In rare cases, the fund also covered the cost of victims’ abortions under the previous attorney general.

Dollars for the victim compensation fund come from fines and penalties paid by individuals convicted of crimes. No general taxpayer dollars are used for the fund.

The attorney general’s office has not disclosed how much it previously spent on emergency contraceptives and abortions. It also has not disclosed how many requests for reimbursement have been submitted by providers since the pause in payments went into effect.

In claims submitted by the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics to the Attorney General’s Office obtained by the Des Moines Register, the cost for the emergency contraceptive pill named ella is \$77.50.

The typical cost for one dose of Plan B, a common emergency contraceptive, is \$50 at retail pharmacies.

Sexual assault response teams across the state have called on Bird to resume payment for morning-after pills, saying that providing free and confidential services in the immediate aftermath of their assault is critical to ensure all victims have access to this care. Advocates say forcing women to seek out and pay for their own emergency contraceptives would be a major barrier.

Victim services advocates say even if Bird decides to permanently halt payments, they will continue to provide these medications to victims without cost.

Bird said the office’s audit of victim services programs has uncovered some “troubling” issues around the state, like counties that didn’t have victim advocates to appear in court alongside victims.

“We need to make sure that every county is getting the services that they need,” Bird said, “that whether someone is a victim of a crime in a small rural county or a large urban area, they need to have advocacy services.”

Bird is a staunch abortion opponent and her office is defending a new state law in court that would ban nearly all abortions after about six weeks of pregnancy, once cardiac activity can be detected in the embryo.

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Reunite

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abreast and not cause too much problem.

They were good riders so they stayed left, passing everybody but the professional racers. They’d knock on doors for showers and hitchhike for rides. And they’d ask their Good Samaritans where they went to church, then go there for a spaghetti or pork chop supper and say such-and-such told them to come.

Word of mouth, they knew, was another form of currency in a small town.

“We had more fun sharing ourselves with those strangers that welcomed us into their houses,” Glenn said. “They wanted to be part of RAGBRAI. They wanted to tell their neighbors about the RAGBRAI riders who knocked on their door. So as much as they gave to us, we gave to them.”

The trio all met on RAGBRAI. Glenn and Virgil, a Chicago-area real estate agent, became friends on RAGBRAI 1984. They took Rich under their wing the next year.

“It’s been that way ever since,” Rich said.

Glenn had a rule that the group always ate breakfast before putting in a single mile. But for some reason on that morning in 1987, they had left Onawa without a meal.

By the time they were into Ute, they’d racked up 20 miles and acute hunger pains.

The only café in town had bikes lined up around the building and cyclists packed in like sardines. But in a stroke of luck, the friends squeezed into a booth.

A waitress came over and tried to take their order. She was distracted. Overwhelmed.

But in good spirits — the sort of mood where laughing and crying both seem like perfectly reasonable responses.

Before food trucks, diner takeovers ruled

Linda Riddle, a lifelong server, started waiting tables at 14.

She worked for Ruth Leisinger at her sweet shop in Ute for years, slinging hash and malts and blue-plate specials. And when Linda wasn’t there, she was cleaning houses for a little extra income.

Linda was one of eight kids in a big farm family. Every morning, the kids rolled out of bed to bail hay or walk beans or milk 26 head of cows before school. Hard work was as bone-deep for Linda as calcium.

Ruthie, as Linda called her, ran her café from 5 a.m. to past 8 p.m. The cook, Marion Straight, was short, a bit stocky, and perpetually cranky — known for spending more time on the counter’s stools than in the kitchen.

He was Ruthie’s “live in,” Linda said. He’d bought her a ring, but it’d worn in two over the years and, so the story goes, eventually fell off in someone’s breakfast.

Ruthie had planned for RAGBRAI as much as one did then: scheduled both her waitresses for the same shift and bought a few more eggs. But this was back before food trucks and pickle juice and IV hydration.

Back when café and diner takeovers were the way of RAGBRAI.

When Linda arrived at 6 a.m. the diner was already crawling with cyclists.

“I thought, Oh, my God, how can they be here already?” Linda said.

Now a few hours in, she tried to take the order of three best friends in a booth but kept getting distracted by the insanity around her. They was no controlling this chaos.

Hey! she shouted at the top of her lungs. *You want something to eat? Fill out the tickets yourselves.*

RAGBRAI riders hop behind the grill

Riders laughed at first. Linda hadn’t snapped — or at least not in an angry way.

“It was just hilarious. The way she said it was so sweet,” Rich said. “And, I don’t know, it might be a stretch to say joyful. But there was just a great atmosphere in the place.”

But Marion’s face when Linda made her announcement was enough to tell the gathered what he felt about the declaration. And a collective RAGBRAI spirit animated them into cooks and waiters and hostesses — whatever was needed.

A few hopped behind the grill. A couple more started new pots of coffee. Still more ran food.

Just pancakes, one of the riders-turned-chefs yelled from the back. Let’s keep it simple, everybody.

I’m not waiting, Linda remembered one guy saying in a huff.

Listen, you’re gonna get awful hungry for the next seven days, a diner replied.

“Then I said, ‘Who wants his breakfast.’ I was gonna auction off the breakfast,” she remembered.

When they finished eating, Glenn asked Linda to break his \$20. They wanted to leave her a big tip — for the food, sure, but mostly for the fun.

Oh, you don’t want to break that bill, honey, she said. *Once you do, they just go so fast.*

“I thought this woman was an Iowa treasure,” Glenn said. “I just remember she was just so innocent. Just so genuine. Where else can you find that but small, rural Iowa.”

They all felt the RAGBRAI magic as they walked out of the diner. That something really special had just happened back there, something that they’d remember for the rest of their lives.

And when Rich got the photo from the lab a month or so after the ride, there they were — all those feelings of joy and good-naturedness and friendship and being together — caught by a shutter click.

RAGBRAI magic — four decades later

Rich has kept a print of that photo in his house ever since, and people who see it always have some form of the same response: *She looks like a good person.*

He’d immediately sent copies to Virgil and Glenn and had always wanted to get one to the waitress.

So in April, right around the time anyone in the Midwest is itching to get outside after a long winter, Rich scrolled the RAGBRAI page on Facebook and the story started coming back to him.

“I do a lot just by gut; it’s how I operate,” he said. “I just felt like I am going to write this up and post it.”

He’d been diagnosed with MS in 2004, and started looking closely at time, what he had left and what he wanted it to mean. He took a solo cross-country bicycle trip across America last year just to test his physical limits.

Finding their favorite RAGBRAI waitress felt like the cherry on top of one of his most treasured life stories.

“Having MS, you do a lot of checking off because you realize you only have so much time,” he said. “I just feel like if there’s anything you need to settle in your life or try to finish or revisit or whatever, do it now.”

Somehow, the waitress’ daughter found the post and responded. She asked if they could all meet along the RAGBRAI 50 route. More than anything, the daughter said, she’d really like to redo that picture.

A lot has changed in the decades since that day in Ute. They’re older, obviously. Virgil doesn’t come on RAGBRAI anymore, retired from the ride now like he’s retired from real estate.

Linda worked at Ruthie’s until 2:30 that “wild” day and then pulled a second shift at the community’s beer garden until after dark. She ran the drunks out of town, she said. *Go on your bikes! Get out of here!*

She works at a senior center in Ute now. Never left town.

Ruthie died a while ago. Marion, too. The shop closed in the early 2000s, Linda thinks. Building’s gone now, torn down to just a grassy knoll.

But Rich and Glenn still ride.

“He’s a farmer from northern Illinois. I am a journalist now living in L.A. Do we have any real similarities? No,” Rich said. “But RAGBRAI brings the two of us together.”

And this year, it brought the three of them together — Glenn, Rich and the waitress, who they now know as Linda.

They talked for more than an hour, like old friends even though they’d really just met.

RAGBRAI has a way of making strangers into friends — even just for a morning.

Rider

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in amateur races for a few years after getting his license from the United States Cycling Federation. His last race was in 1978.

It also led him to RAGBRAI. A friend was a bicycle mechanic at Bill’s Cyclery, and Welton learned of the ride through the owner, Bill Albright, who was good friends with RAGBRAI’s co-founder, Des Moines Register journalist John Karras.

Welton was in his early 20s when he made his first ride.

“I was probably the first African American that rode RAGBRAI,” Welton said.

It wasn’t until around his fifth RAGBRAI, he said, that he remembers seeing another Black rider. Even on his 17th, he said. “There wasn’t really that many of us. You could count them on both hands.”

After that, everyone he rode with started leaving Iowa. So he started hanging out with other friends and took up golf. But he drifted back to bikes over time. And he had always ridden to work every day, 5 to 6 miles each way, at what is now MidAmerican Energy.

Collecting memories — and bikes

One ride Welton remembers in particular was the 1981 RAGBRAI IX, which had some of the worst weather of any RAGBRAI. Riders dealt with continuous rain the first day, and headwinds, more rain, and temperatures in the upper 40s the second day. Most gave up at the first town on Day 2. Campgrounds were flooded and residents picked up riders, who spent the night in private homes, garages, and a high school gym. The day was dubbed “Soggy Monday.”

Welton said the ride was hard, made even worse when he got flat after flat. He ended up going through five sew-up tires — the original, his spare, and then three he bought from a repair truck.

Another memorable RAGBRAI was the year he and a buddy rode a racing tandem bike in the southern part of Iowa. A crew from a Sioux City TV station had been filming and when they saw Welton and his friend, they followed them for about two hours.

“The cameraman was hanging out of the back window and the other guy was in the other window, holding the microphone,” Welton said. He said the crew asked them if they knew how fast they were going, and “we said, no, we don’t have a speedometer, and he said, ‘You guys are doing 50 miles an hour.’”

Welton’s bikes also are memorable. In addition to the TREK Domane SL 7 road bike he rode Wednesday, he also has a fixed-gear State bike, and in October 2022, a year after he won a bout with cancer, his son bought him a Norco fat-tire bike he had been eyeing. He rides that at night, in sub-zero weather and in the snow.

He also still has the Conalogo, Tommasini, Motobecane and Falcon bikes he rode in early RAGBRAIs, now collector’s items.

Ravorite RAGBRAIs include hills

Around the time of his third cross-state ride, Welton met a racer from Sweden who used to visit Bill’s Cyclery, and he took Welton under his wing. Every day, they’d ride Ashworth Road through West Des Moines.

“There’s a hill just before you get to the end of Ashworth,” Welton said, and each day, the racer would remain at the top of the hill and make Welton ride up and down it 10 to 15 times. He told Welton that this was the way he’d become strong.

“He said if you become a hill climber, that’s where you separate the men from the boys,” Welton recalled.

After mastering climbing, Welton helped others with hills. He used to ride in the Quad City Bicycle Club’s annual weekend long ride called TOMRV, the Tour of the Mississippi River Valley. Part of a ride on the Illinois side went up a hill that had a 16.5% grade, was about a mile and a half long and ended at Chestnut Mountain Resort at the top.

“Me and my buddy would ride up and down and push

people up that hill because they were struggling,” he said.

So his favorite RAGBRAI routes were the ones with the biggest hills, specifically the area around Dubuque.

“It’s prettier, really scenic, and that’s where the hills are at here in the state of Iowa,” Welton said, adding in a statement some first-time riders might marvel at, “The hills like, you know, Sioux City, Council Bluffs, those hills aren’t nothing.”

Making plans for next year

RAGBRAI has changed in the years since Welton last rode. He was amazed by the growth of the ride — from the several hundred on his first ride to the several thousand on his last to 2023’s expected 60,000.

He also was amazed by the food options compared to his early rides, when at most somebody might give riders water or kids might have a lemonade stand.

And he was amazed by the crowded roads, which forced him to get off his bike and walk. He said it happened three or four times, for a total of four or five blocks, on Wednesday’s ride. About a mile and a half from Polk City, one of the guys he was riding with overheated and couldn’t go on, he said.

“It was just impossible, with all the people coming down the highway, to turn around,” he said. “So, I pushed him from there all the way into Ankeny until I could get him first aid.”

Welton’s wife then came and took the overheated rider home. Fortunately, he was fine.

Rediscovering the ride on its 50th anniversary has Welton thinking about the years ahead.

“I missed being on RAGBRAI,” he said. “That camaraderie and all the stops, the food and all that good stuff.”

If he’d had a ride back home, he said, he’d have continued on to Tama-Toledo. Or, if he’d planned things, he’d have completed the whole ride.

A buddy from Nebraska told him he’d go next year if they had an RV.

“I’m already looking at options for renting an RV,” he said.