

# Des Moines Register

## NEWS

# Tow woes: Here's how Iowans can lose their vehicles in just 2 weeks

*What happened when one of the metro's most maligned companies towed the wrong guy.*



**Lee Rood**

Des Moines Register

June 23, 2025 | Updated Feb. 4, 2026, 7:35 p.m. CT

## Key Points

Chris Costa's car was towed and nearly sold by Crow Tow in Des Moines, Iowa, due to the state's lenient towing laws.

Iowa law allows vehicles towed from private property to be sold after just 10 days, with proceeds going to the towing company.

Consumer advocates criticize Iowa's towing laws as some of the weakest in the nation, offering little protection for vehicle owners.

*First in an occasional series.*

Nationwide, complaints to insurance companies about towing have ballooned almost 90% over the last three years.

But Chris Costa didn't know that.

Towing wasn't something Costa thought much about until March 30, when Crow's Auto Service towed the white 2021 Honda CR-V he'd purchased for his son. It had been parked in a private lot on Bell Avenue in Des Moines.

Costa said he and his wife weren't aware his son had parked in a prohibited spot and that he didn't have the money at the time to retrieve the towed vehicle. They learned he was trying to come up with the cash without having to bother them.

Costa also didn't know Crow Tow had sent a notice April 2 informing him, as the registered owner of the CR-V, that he owed \$380 as of that day in towing and storage charges that would have to be paid before he could retrieve it.

Costa said he and his wife didn't go to the post office to get Crow Tow's certified letter, which required a signature, until a second attempt to deliver it at their West Des Moines home on April 14. The notice they received didn't tell them it was from the towing company. Costa said that by the time they learned the CR-V had been towed and he called Crow Tow on April 16, the owner, Randy Crow, told him the vehicle, worth about \$26,000, had been sold.

Abandoned cars can be a big problem for major cities, causing blight that affects entire neighborhoods. But even in cities such as Detroit, which [currently has a mayor-initiated towing crackdown](#) on abandoned cars, owners have 48 hours to move vehicles from public spaces, or two weeks from private property, before they are towed.

And if towed vehicles in Detroit go unretrieved, the state of Michigan saves the net proceeds from those eventually sold at auction to be distributed to the last known owner. The money goes into a lost-and-found fund, and if no owner emerges, it ends up listed on Michigan's unclaimed property website, according to the Detroit Free Press.

But in Iowa, any vehicles that have remained illegally on public or private property for as little as 24 hours can be towed and immediately declared abandoned. Once a tow company sends the owner or lien holder a certified letter providing notification of the tow, Iowa law allows the vehicle to be auctioned or sold as scrap in as little as 10 days' time.

Costa didn't know that. And he didn't know that many consumer advocates and attorneys across the country believe Iowa has one of the weakest laws — if not the weakest — in the country when it comes to protecting the rights of owners of towed cars.

He said when Crow told him he wasn't entitled to any of the proceeds remaining from the CR-V's auction after the tow and storage fees were paid, he couldn't believe it.

Other than a house, a car is one of most people's most valuable assets — their only way to get to work and make a living. Crow, Costa said, told him it's legal for him to keep those proceeds after a private tow in Iowa.

Crow did not respond to an email and message to his office seeking comment.

## **Costa: 'You and I are going to have a little bit of a problem'**

There also apparently were things Crow didn't know until Costa told him.

Costa is president of Knapp Properties, a multi-million real estate company that has rental properties — and towing contracts — throughout the Des Moines metro. Knapp Properties contracts with Crow Tow, especially at several apartment complexes downtown.

So when Crow told Costa April 16 that the CR-V — on his tow lot for just two weeks — was already on its way to a new owner, Costa said, he told him, "You and I are going to have a little bit of a problem."

The sale also was a problem because, by law, the CR-V was supposed to be sold at a public auction, not via a private sale. Crow Tow's advertising on Facebook did show a 2021 white Honda CR-V as being slated for an April 17 auction, but Costa said Crow had claimed the day before that the vehicle already had been sold.

Costa learned quickly that Iowa's law gives tow companies wide berth to easily take the proceeds from auctions of vehicles towed from private lots. And although Crow Tow has won big contracts — **including one June 17 with Polk County** — to do law enforcement impounds, proceeds from private tow auctions have become a big part of the company's business, with the number of vehicles sold at those auctions easily outnumbering those sold at impound auctions.

**More: Des Moines leaders, some receiving political donations, are divided on Crow Tow's practices**

Costa also realized there's inequity in Iowa's current towing and abandoned vehicle law: Auction proceeds from vehicles impounded by law enforcement have to be held for 90 days to be given to their rightful owner or lien holder before they go to a state road-use fund. But that's not the case for vehicles auctioned off after being towed from apartments, businesses and other private lots.

After tow companies recoup their tow charges, fees and auction costs, the private tow auction proceeds are gravy. And in cases like Costa's vehicle, that gravy can amount to thousands of dollars.

Costa believes he had more leverage than most to get Crow's attention: He reminded him that he heads a company with rental properties in Urbandale, West Des Moines, Pleasant Hill and Des Moines.

Not long after, Costa said, Crow called him to tell him the CR-V he'd said had already been sold was loaded on a truck and headed back to the Crow Tow lot, 1826 SE 21st St., for pickup.

And although Crow and his employees have insisted others need to pay cash to pay their costs and retrieve their vehicles, Costa's wife was allowed to use a credit card — for a fee — to pay \$1,540 to get the CR-V back.

An invoice the couple received showed a charge of \$130.85 for a "premium" tow, \$897 for 16 days of storage, \$300 to cut a new key, a \$56 administration fee and a \$59.24 additional fee for use of the credit card.

The CR-V, Costa said, was returned April 18 — the day after Crow Tow advertised a white 2021 CR-V was going to be sold at the public auction.

## Iowa: Ripe for predatory towing, short on reform

Craig Sepich, director of strategy, policy and government affairs for the National Insurance Crime Bureau, a group with 1,300 members in the insurance industry, has singled out Iowa as one of the states most in need of towing overhaul.

“Iowa is definitely on our list of states with very limited consumer protection,” Sepich said.

The way Iowa's state law is currently written, it essentially allows companies to “steal vehicles in a roundabout way,” he said.

That's because the state has such a short window between when a vehicle is towed and when it can be sold at auction. Those towed from private lots, which, like Costa's vehicle, may be worth thousands more than their tow and storage fees.

In Iowa, legislators from disparate ends of a very divided political landscape have proposed measures in recent years that would attempt to better protect vehicle owners from practices that essentially allow companies to take their wheels with little opportunity for recourse.

**More:** [What should you do if your car gets towed in Iowa? Here's what to know](#)

Those measures have arisen after voluminous complaints, petitions, lawsuits and media coverage. But to date, they have gone nowhere — including a bill this year, Senate File 468, which Crow Tow's lobbyists and another for a smaller towing company were the only people registered to lobby against it.

Sepich said despite a big push from credit unions, and support from auto dealers, rental car companies and consumer groups like AARP, the bill failed to advance further than a committee. Groups that typically lobby on law enforcement issues, like the Iowa Police Chiefs Association and Iowa Department of Public Safety, registered as undecided on the measure and sat on the sidelines.

Crow Tow's primary lobbyist also happens to be a major donor to local officials and former campaign manager for new Polk County Supervisor Mark Holm.

In recent years, the Des Moines City Council has failed to take any action to initiate its own towing ordinance, despite repeated requests by disgruntled Crow Tow customers.

A Change.org petition that called Crow Tow predatory and garnered more than 7,700 signatures went nowhere.

The council for years has been extending a contract for Crow Tow to do impound work for the Des Moines Police Department, but will issue a request for new proposals later this year, according to James Remington, deputy finance director for the city of Des Moines.

Since his own encounter with Crow Tow, Costa has reached out to policymakers, residents and Watchdog about his family's experience.

"I want to make Iowa's law more consumer friendly," he said. "I want citizens to have more of a chance to reclaim their vehicles."

He said he's come to believe the problems he experienced have more to do with a weak law than the business practices of the city's largest towing service. But Costa believes Crow Tow absolutely treated him differently than most customers.

"What it's helped me understand is that there's a system for the haves and have nots," he said. "For a relatively minor infraction, there are many, many people who aren't in my position who would have lost a \$26,000 car."

*Lee Rood's Reader's Watchdog column helps Iowans get answers and accountability from public officials, the justice system, businesses and nonprofits. Reach her at [lrood@registermedia.com](mailto:lrood@registermedia.com), at 515-284-8549, on Twitter at [@leeroood](https://twitter.com/leeroood) or on Facebook at [Facebook.com/readerswatchdog](https://www.facebook.com/readerswatchdog).*



# Des Moines Register

## NEWS

# Iowa towing law provides few consumer protections compared to other states



**Lee Rood**

Des Moines Register

June 23, 2025, 6:01 a.m. CT

## Key Points

Iowa receives a failing grade for its consumer towing laws, ranking 47th nationally.

Towing companies in Iowa face minimal regulations and can charge high fees, contributing to potential abuse.

Unlike many other states, Iowa doesn't require licensing for tow operators or prohibit patrolling private lots for unauthorized parking.

*Part of an occasional series.*

Iowa gets some of the lowest marks in the country from groups that rate towing laws on behalf of consumers.

[Towinglaws.com](#), a Tennessee-based organization created by towing professionals that recognizes high performers within the industry, gives the state an F and ranks it 47th nationwide.

Elsewhere around the Midwest, Illinois ranks fifth nationally with a B+, while Kansas ranks 38th and gets a D, Minnesota ranks 34th with a D+ and Wisconsin ranks 31st with a C+.

In recent years, as towing practices across the U.S. have become much more predatory and high-profile, a number of states — including Connecticut, Florida,

Illinois, Maine, Mississippi, Tennessee and Virginia — and several cities have initiated changes in their towing and abandoned car laws or ordinances.

The industry brings in a lot of money: Impounding for the Des Moines Police Department has been good business for years for Crow Auto Services, the metro's largest tow company, which on June 17 also [regained an impounding contract with the Polk County Sheriff's Office](#).

**More:** [Crow Tow insists it isn't 'predatory.'](#) A lawsuit and an Iowa legislator could test that.

Over the last three calendar years, Crow Tow has received \$586,409 from the city for its towing and storage services, and reported that it sold 2,450 unclaimed vehicles at public auction, city and state records show. The proceeds from those auctions amounted to \$913,972, some of which eventually wound up in a state road use fund.

Crow Tow charges a discounted rate to the city and county for towing and storage. A city impound can cost the city \$18.93 and storage \$4.91 a day. But consumers pay a much higher price: as much as \$200 for a tow and \$57 a day storage, invoices show.

Iowa law sets no limit on what companies can charge, unlike at least 23 other states.

In Iowa, towing from private lots can be very lucrative. Not only can the company negotiate contracts with property management companies and charge higher prices than for public impounds, it can keep the proceeds from auctioning cars that go unclaimed and are officially designated as “abandoned” under Iowa law.

Companies aren't allowed to do that with cars towed from public roadways for law enforcement. For public tows, the owner of a car is supposed to be entitled to any funds if the sale price of that car exceeds the tow and storage charges.

Iowa Code 321.89(5)(b) states: "Any remainder from the proceeds of a sale shall be held for the owner of the vehicle or entitled lienholder for 90 days and shall then be deposited in the road use tax fund."

Here are some of the other reasons experts have said Iowa's tow and abandoned vehicle law is in need of an overhaul:

## **Iowa's timelines make towing quick and easy**

A company under the law can tow a car after it is parked illegally after just 24 hours, and declare it abandoned the same day.

Iowa also has one of the shortest timespans in the country — 10 days from the date a tow company's written notice — to sell a vehicle as abandoned. (Towing companies have up to 20 days to write those notices and send them via certified letter to the owner or lien holder.)

Once notified — via a legal ad in a newspaper if the owner can't be found — the owner can seek a court hearing in those 10 days if they believe it was an illegal tow.

If a vehicle goes unclaimed and was towed from a private lot, the towing company can keep the proceeds from its sale at public auction. Typically, those vehicles are purchased by those who may want to fix and resell them to auto dealers or for scrap metal.

## **Iowa lags in protections of owners' rights**

Other states are more forgiving of vehicle owners and better protect their vehicles.

This year, Connecticut legislators passed a new law overhauling the state's towing laws after [a report by the Connecticut Mirror and ProPublica](#) in January found widespread problems. The problems included cars being towed for minor rule infractions at apartment complexes, towing companies that insisted on cash payments and issues that made it difficult to release a car unless it was to the person registered as the owner.

Those problems exist in Iowa, and more, such as an extremely short timespan between when a car is towed and when it can be sold. Before Connecticut's law was changed, its window — 15 days if the value of the car is deemed to be \$1,500 or less

— was a third more than Iowa's 10 days. And tow companies there were required to hold on to the proceeds of a towed vehicle sold at auction for one year so owners had the opportunity to claim the money.

While Iowa law allows funds to be held 90 days for owners after auctions of police-impounded vehicles, it doesn't require any proceeds to be returned to owners of vehicles towed from private lots.

The changes passed in Connecticut require companies to take credit cards, work after hours to assist customers, take more steps to give the owners a chance to reclaim their vehicles, and ensure before approving a sale that the state's Department of Motor Vehicles checks whether the driver filed any complaints about the tow. The actual sale can't happen until 30 days after the tow. The new legislation called for the state's Department of Motor Vehicles to work with the Connecticut attorney general to develop a consumer bill of rights on towing.

In Nebraska, if a vehicle remains unclaimed after 90 days and is still in the tow's possession, [the tow can take out a lien to recover any fees owed](#). The proceeds from the sale of the vehicle are intended to satisfy the lien, including any reasonable charges of notice, advertising and sale.

But any money obtained from the sale of the vehicle that exceeds the fees owed must be surrendered to the county treasurer. The treasurer holds that money for the rightful owner for a period of five years, and then it can be appropriated to support schools.

## **Iowa doesn't prohibit trolling for cars to tow**

Iowa is not among states that prohibit patrolling or scanning lots for illegally parked cars. That's a big deal in the Des Moines metro because it has triggered widespread complaints and caused altercations and injuries in some cases.

In Wichita, Kansas, the City Council passed an ordinance June 16 that requires tow companies to notify owners before towing their vehicles, [according to KWCH news](#).

The move is an attempt to cut down on car thefts, which had increased 17% in a year's time, and unauthorized tows.

In some states like North Carolina, private property owners have to wait seven days before contacting a tow company to remove a vehicle.

The [U.S. Public Interest Research Group](#) has identified Iowa as being among states that don't guarantee owners can access their personal items after cars are towed. And Iowa doesn't explicitly require towing companies to provide itemized bills or reimburse owners for any damages that happen as a result of towing.

In addition, Iowa doesn't ensure consumers can use credit cards to pay towing and storage fees. Around a dozen states do.

## **Iowa doesn't require licensing for tow operators**

Craig Sepich, director of strategy, policy and government affairs for the National Insurance Crime Bureau, said Iowa is definitely on the bureau's list of states with "very little consumer protections."

Lenient towing laws open a state to more fraud and abuse, which contributes to higher insurance rates, he said.

Iowa law, he said, doesn't require professional licensing of tow operators, operator permits or much oversight. "Over 30 states have these regulations in place," he said.

In Iowa, he said, state statute requires the Department of Transportation to issue tow operators certificates qualifying them as operators of emergency response vehicle for impounds after accidents, "but that doesn't impact what they're doing with private tows."

Sepich said he knows "professional licensing is a sticking point with the Legislature. We see that in the Midwest. But other states with the same political environment have them."

*Lee Rood's Reader's Watchdog column helps Iowans get answers and accountability from public officials, the justice system, businesses and nonprofits. Reach her at [lrood@registermedia.com](mailto:lrood@registermedia.com), at 515-284-8549, on Twitter at [@leerood](https://twitter.com/leerood) or on Facebook at [Facebook.com/readerswatchdog](https://www.facebook.com/readerswatchdog).*

# Des Moines Register

## NEWS

# Every car has a story: Here's how people lose vehicles at Crow Tow auctions



**Lee Rood**

Des Moines Register

July 31, 2025, 6:01 a.m. CT

## Key Points

Iowa law allows tow companies up to 20 days to notify vehicle owners and lienholders of impounds, a timeline some legislators unsuccessfully tried to shorten.

A Des Moines car salesman and a Harley Davidson dealership complained about delayed or missing impound notices from Crow Tow, hindering their ability to reclaim vehicles and potentially losing them to auction.

Crow Tow owner Randy Crow maintains his company's actions are legal, suggesting some individuals abandon vehicles rather than reclaim them.

When Des Moines car salesman Mario Gomez got a certified letter from Crow Tow dated Nov. 1, 2023, telling him a 2009 Volvo sold at the Calidelfy Autos car lot had been impounded, he knew he wanted it back.

Calidelfy had made a loan for the purchase of the Volvo and it was due to be repossessed from a customer for lack of payment, said Gomez, a co-owner of the business.

But Gomez realized when he got the abandoned vehicle notice that the Volvo already had sat on Crow Tow's lot for three weeks, accumulating daily storage fees on top of the impound charge. By the time he got the certified letter, the towing and daily storage fees were so high — \$1,679 — Gomez didn't know whether paying that bill would be worth it.

Under Iowa law, towers have up to 20 days to notify any title holder, lien holder or “any known claimant to the vehicle” of an impound — a timeline that some legislators this year tried unsuccessfully to shorten to five days.

In cases where Crow Tow tows from private lots, the company has incentive under existing law to move quickly to notify car owners and others with a financial interest in the vehicles. In as little as 10 days after a tow notice, it can auction the vehicle or sell it for salvage and keep all the profit.

But when others have a financial interest in a vehicle, towers may not want to act as quickly under current state law. Some owners, credit unions, insurers and dealerships with a financial stake in vehicles have complained to state authorities they received tow and impound notices weeks late, or not at all, state records show.

Gomez said when he contacted Crow Tow, employees refused to let him see the impounded 2009 Volvo, even though his company was the lien holder and had the title. That's not allowed in many states.

He said his dealership sold the Volvo for around \$6,000, but that was long before it was impounded. Most impound vehicles on Crow Tow's lot have been damaged or involved in accidents, and the company's storage fees were adding up — \$56 a day at the time.

“If I would have been aware of (the impound) the first day, I would have gone and immediately picked it up,” Gomez said.

But when he called to inquire, he said, employees were hostile. “They pretty much blamed the late notice on the mail taking a long time.”

Gomez said when his company sends a repo man to take back one of the cars he's sold, he is required under state law to give any profit that exceeds the cost of the repo and debt back to the title holder. Impound auctions are supposed to work similarly under Iowa law.

The Iowa Department of Transportation has said that if the sale price of an impounded vehicle exceeds the tow and storage charges, an owner is entitled to the remaining funds. Iowa Code 321.89(5)(b) states: "Any remainder from the proceeds of a sale shall be held for the owner of the vehicle or entitled lienholder for 90 days and shall then be deposited in the road use tax fund."

But Gomez said Crow Tow employees didn't tell him that when he called. He also said Crow Tow doesn't disclose what impound vehicles fetch at auction, so he has no idea whether he would have been owed proceeds after the sale.

In a consumer protection complaint to Iowa's Attorney General, Gomez spelled out his biggest concern: "If all tow yards work this way, there should be new laws where at the very least the dealer or lienholder gets notified the same day the car is impounded."

He added: "These tow companies make way too much money on their fees, and then they go and auction vehicles off on top of that. It is insane," he wrote.

Crow Tow owner Randy Crow, however, said what his company did was completely legal. "Some individuals make a business decision to dump vehicles on the towing company instead of exercising their rights under the Code," he wrote in a statement to Watchdog.

Others have made complaints similar to Gomez's.

Big Barn Harley Davidson in Des Moines said in a complaint to the Iowa Department of Transportation that the business agreed to take a motorcycle in trade last year from an owner and paid off his loan. Then it discovered the same motorcycle — which apparently was not yet in its possession — was being auctioned by Crow Tow.

An investigation by the DOT showed Crow Tow took possession of the motorcycle after it was impounded in an accident. Crow Tow sent notices of an abandoned

vehicle to the previous owner and someone who had just purchased it and had temporary plates.

Big Barn got no notice, the DOT said. But Big Barn was informed of the impending auction. Like Gomez, Big Barn opted not to pay the tow and storage fees to retrieve the motorcycle.

## **It was the only car she had. Then it disappeared.**

After years of contracting with Crow Tow, Des Moines police say they have a process to ensure cars it impounds aren't sold at auction when they shouldn't be.

"We send a list of all vehicles impounded by officers to Crow Tow and we are sent back a list of all vehicles they have marked for police impound, which we verify by VIN number," department spokesperson Sgt. Paul Parizek said in an email. "These lists are compared so any discrepancies can be corrected."

But people do tangle with towing companies over how soon cars are sold at auction and whether they should receive excess proceeds.

JoAnne McCall couldn't find her car after leaving it during a blizzard on a Council Bluffs highway. She later learned it had been stolen and found in Des Moines.

McCall's son-in-law, Kevin Allen, had purchased the salvaged, white 2016 Volkswagen Jetta for \$5,100 for her at an Iowa Insurance Auctions sale in late January. Under state law, a vehicle salvaged after an accident is supposed to be repaired to roadworthy condition and inspected by law enforcement before it can be legally registered. McCall said she'd purchased parts but hadn't yet made all the repairs needed to register the vehicle legally and get a new title.

Still, she drove the Jetta. It was the only car she had.

The blizzard in mid-March forced McCall to pull over on the roadside and have her daughter pick her up. When she returned to retrieve the Jetta after the snow cleared, it was gone.

The Omaha resident reported it stolen in Pottawattamie County on March 27, after failing to locate it in calls to towing companies. She said she was told the vehicle's VIN and information was placed in a database that law enforcement agencies use to help identify stolen cars.

Eventually, she said, a grifter contacted her, sending pictures of important financial records that had been in the car. The man said he wanted \$9,000 to return the documents and claimed to have gotten them from a drug user in Des Moines. McCall met the man in Des Moines at Merle Hay Mall, gave him \$40 and got some of her documents back.

She said she later stopped at the Pottawattamie County Sheriff's Office and let an investigator know some names she'd learned of people who might have been involved in the theft.

On April 29, Des Moines police recovered the Jetta, without its license plates, and had it impounded from the 300 block of Corning Ave. in Des Moines. A police report shows officers questioned three people in connection with the stolen vehicle, but none were charged for lack of evidence of their involvement in the actual theft. Police cleared the case, notified Pottawattamie County, and took the Jetta off the database.

On May 2, Crow Tow sent a registered impound notice to the vehicle's last registered owner, State Farm Mutual Automobile of DeSoto.

McCall said she and her son in law didn't learn from Pottawattamie County until later in May that Des Moines police found the car and it was at Crow Tow. She said she immediately called Crow Tow and a woman there said the Jetta had been sold at auction in April. She said her son in law called back and learned the car was actually sold at an impound auction May 29.

McCall called Watchdog and learned she and her son-in-law had 90 days under state law to try to contact Crow Tow in writing and request any proceeds from the

impound auction after towing and storage costs were paid. So that's what her son in law did.

But Crow said neither the son in law nor McCall were entitled to any. That's because the vehicle was still registered to State Farm, he said.

He said notice of the impound went to State Farm and a subsidiary, but neither responded. The vehicle was sold after 31 days on his lot, Crow said.

He noted that the car had a salvage title and, by law, was not supposed to be driven.

In a recorded conversation with a Pottawattamie County deputy who found out too late the car was already sold, Crow said many of the cars on his lot are not properly registered.

"I got 7 acres of cars, and every one's got a story," he told the deputy.

*Lee Rood's Reader's Watchdog column helps Iowans get answers and accountability from public officials, the justice system, businesses and nonprofits. Reach her at [lrood@registermedia.com](mailto:lrood@registermedia.com), at 515-284-8549, on Twitter at [@leeroood](https://twitter.com/@leeroood) or on Facebook at [Facebook.com/readerswatchdog](https://www.facebook.com/readerswatchdog).*

# Des Moines Register

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## NEWS

# Crow Tow owner says he helped write Iowa's towing law. Here's why some Iowans hate it

*Under Iowa's weak law, towers have more rights than consumers*



**Lee Rood**

Des Moines Register

July 31, 2025, 5:05 a.m. CT

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## Key Points

Iowa's lenient towing laws allow companies like Crow Tow to quickly sell towed vehicles, sometimes within two weeks.

William Frey purchased a towed vehicle at auction only to discover it was reported stolen, leading to a three-month legal battle.

Iowa law lacks consumer protections common in other states, such as limits on fees and requirements for accepting credit cards.

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*Part of an ongoing series.* In Iowa, a person's car can be sold legally at an auction in just a couple weeks' time — before the owner or lender may realize it's missing.

Just ask William "Billy" Frey.

Frey flips cars for extra money in the winter when he isn't running a grocery cart repair business. The first vehicle he bought in an auction at Des Moines towing company Crow Tow was a 2007 Toyota Camry he acquired in January.

After he got a new title for \$264 and made about \$1,600 in repairs, he said, he let a guy who wanted to buy it drive it around Ankeny in March.

That's when police pulled over the would-be buyer and told him he was driving a stolen car.

Frey might have lost the Camry, but police listened to his story, and a judge intervened.

Frey learned the Camry's previous owner, Francis Slanger, had been working out of town when the car was towed and didn't receive a certified notice Crow Tow typically sends to car owners and lien holders warning that a vehicle is in its custody and could be auctioned.

By the time Slanger realized the Camry was missing and reported it stolen, Crow Tow had auctioned it to Frey, court documents show.

Just 15 days passed from the tow to the auction. But it would take Frey three months to prove he wasn't a car thief and win back the vehicle in late June.

Hundreds of similar disputes about the business practices of Crow Tow, one of Iowa's largest towing companies, have played out in the office of its sprawling lot on Southeast 21st Street. Few of the unhappy owners have been as successful as Frey.

Car owners, lenders, insurers and dealerships all have registered complaints about Crow Tow with the Iowa Attorney General's Office and Department of Transportation, police, insurance regulators and the Better Business Bureau. But most go nowhere, open records requests to the various agencies suggest.

Randy Crow, who runs the family business with his wife and son, said of Frey's complaint what he often tells officials who inquire: What happened was perfectly legal.

And Crow should know.

In a successful bid this June to regain a lucrative impound contract with the Polk County Sheriff's Office, Crow Tow boasted that Randy Crow helped write part of Iowa's decades-old abandoned vehicle law.

The proposal also said Crow Tow is “widely recognized for its rigorous compliance” with that law, “executing every impoundment with precision, consistency and a zero-tolerance approach to oversight or misapplication.”

In response to specific questions related to a complaint Frey filed with the attorney general's office and others by folks who have lost vehicles they thought belonged to them, Crow said in an email that no one — not a title holder, lender or repo company — has any legal right to a vehicle under the state law after it is sold as abandoned at a Crow Tow auction.

“Iowa code extinguishes the rights of any previous owner or lienholder once the vehicle has been sold,” he wrote.

The law, with some of the shortest windows in the country to declare a towed car abandoned and sell it at auction, bolsters Crow's business. Crow Tow has current impound contracts with the sheriff's office, Des Moines and Johnston police and the Iowa State Patrol.

But the bulk of its business is in the form of private towing contracts throughout central Iowa with owners of properties such as apartment complexes, shopping centers and other establishments. Crow Tow advertises at least two auctions a month on Facebook, sometimes with more than 100 vehicles at a time.

**More from this series:** [Tow woes: Here's how Iowans can lose their vehicle in just 2 weeks](#)

Yet it isn't the volume Crow Tow handles that bothers former customers like Frey. It's how Crow Tow drivers and employees deal with often cash-strapped customers and the ease with which Iowa's weak law allows them to quickly take possession of what often is a person's most valuable asset.

Frey, of Des Moines, said when he learned the Camry he bought actually had belonged to Slanger, he was willing to give it back to Crow Tow so the company could return it. But Crow Tow employees wouldn't give back the \$2,820 he'd spent at the auction.

"They just shrugged me off, and told me (it's) not their problem," he said. "They wouldn't give me the time of day."

Worse, Frey said, when he needed to get a copy of his receipt from the auction, employees told him he couldn't use a debit card and insisted he pay \$50 cash to prove he'd bought the Camry.

The kicker, he said, is that they also refused to provide a second receipt for the \$50 cash expense.

"There's no fighting Crow Tow," he said. "It's ridiculous how they are."

Randy Crow said Frey didn't immediately register the Camry in Polk County and alleged Frey had been trying to sell the vehicle when the title wasn't in his name. He said the Camry wasn't reported stolen until Feb. 23, at which point it had been out of Crow Tow's possession for almost a month.

If Frey had transferred the vehicle title at the time of his purchase, it would not have been considered stolen, Crow said. "Mr. Frey was having people test drive to buy this vehicle, which he can't legally sell without transferring it in his name."

Frey said he did register the Camry, and the mishap never would have happened if Crow Tow had to wait longer before selling impounded vehicles and had to ensure those who are sent tow notices actually receive them.

Crow acknowledged charging \$50 for copies of auction paperwork.

"If the customer's actions cause a need for additional labor to research and reproduce the documents, that labor must be charged for," he said. "They can pay cash or card."

Crow Tow, he said, did all its due diligence and followed all applicable laws to the letter.

"Crow Tow is not responsible for how long other agencies take to process this issue and resolve it," he said.

## Unhappy customers often met with inaction

In other locales, as complaints about predatory towing practices have skyrocketed, consumers have filed class-action lawsuits, cities and counties have passed or reworked ordinances and state legislators have enacted sweeping changes aimed at fixing lopsided laws that protect towing companies more than vehicle owners.

None of those fixes have been made in Iowa.

Crow Tow's owners and lobbyists — who have [donated generously to the campaigns of local city council members, Des Moines Mayor Connie Boesen, the Polk County Board of Supervisors and its chair, Matt McCoy](#) — have helped successfully fight off public discussion of a towing ordinance in Des Moines and bipartisan efforts in the state Legislature to change decades-old state code that consumer advocates say is among the [worst for consumers in the country](#).

Open records requests this summer to a mix of agencies show Iowans complain frequently about towing in general, and Crow Tow in particular. But they tend to get little relief when they do.

Crow Tow had 370 calls to police, most because of disputes, from 2018 to 2020, before Polk supervisors ended the county's lucrative towing contract in 2021. More than 7,700 residents signed a Change.org petition criticizing its business tactics and urging Des Moines police to end the towing company's contract, scheduled to be rebid this fall.

Crow Tow's new impound contract with the Polk County Sheriff's Office, which began July 1 and ends in 2028, requires the contractor and its employees to be gracious and serve "with the attitude that their service is an extension of Polk County government, and that their dealings with the public shall be carried out with the utmost respect for the citizens with whom they come into contact."

The county, in its request for proposals, required Crow Tow to post a sign in a conspicuous place on its premises, telling those with impound complaints to contract the sheriff's office, which is responsible for documenting them. But no one has, said sheriff's Lt. Trevor Barber.

No one registered a dispute with the sheriff before Crow Tow lost the county contract and no one has since the contract was renewed. "Not to my knowledge," Barber said.

The Des Moines Police Department did hold a handful of impound appeal hearings each year up until 2023, reversing one or two decisions each year. That was before Crow Tow took over vehicle release from police this year and auctioning duties from another contractor.

No appeal hearings have been held in 2024 or this year, according to information provided by the city.

Under Iowa law, title holders, lien holders or legal claimants of cars impounded by law enforcement are supposed to be entitled to hearings. They also are entitled to any proceeds from public impound auctions after towing and storage fees are paid, according to Iowa's Department of Transportation. The city and county are required to hold onto auction proceeds for 90 days in case claims are made.

But few who complain insist on hearings or demand excess proceeds. When asked, several people who have lost vehicles told Reader's Watchdog they didn't know those provisions existed in Iowa law.

There also appears to be confusion now among the city, county and Crow Tow about who should be responsible for adhering to those provisions.

Crow contended they apply only when vehicles are "towed by law enforcement, disposed of by law enforcement and (the vehicles) are with the law enforcement agency." If owners have an appeal, he said, "it is with the law enforcement agency, not the towing company."

The sheriff's office doesn't have an updated policy on how to deal with impound complaints and appeals. That "probably needs to be reviewed and updated," said Capt. Brandon Bracelin.

Krista Morton, the police department's longtime property management and evidence supervisor, contended in a written response that "auction proceeds do not go to the vehicle owner or any lien holders."

Later, Peter Zemansky, a spokesperson for the city of Des Moines, acknowledged Morton wasn't aware owners and lien holders have a legal right to any excess proceeds from impound auctions. Morton's office is supposed to monitor vehicles held for police investigations.

Des Moines City Manager Scott Sanders said in a statement it's Crow Tow's responsibility to comply with Iowa Code 321.89, the abandoned vehicle law, and the current contract.

That contract says: "The contractor shall comply will all applicable local, state and federal laws, rules and regulations in performing services under the contract."

"Of course, the city would investigate any claim of noncompliance involving the city," Sanders said.

**More from this series:** [Iowa towing law provides few consumer protections compared to other states](#)

## **Crow Tow has the technology to help strapped customers. But does it?**

In Iowa, cars left unattended for as little as 24 hours can be towed and immediately declared abandoned. Once a tow company sends the owner or lien holder a certified letter providing notification of a tow, the law allows an unclaimed vehicle to be auctioned or sold as scrap in as little as 10 days' time.

Crow said in an email this month his company never auctions a vehicle in 10 days. Still, state records related to abandoned car sales, obtained from the DOT under open records law, show it is common for vehicles Crow Tow tows to be sold in as little as two or three weeks after such notices are written, as was the Toyota that Frey bought in January.

Nothing in Iowa code prevents tow truck drivers from [sweeping the parking lots of private businesses to tow as many vehicles as possible](#), as customers have complained Crow Tow has done for years.

Nothing requires them to drop a vehicle from a truck if a car owner asks, or charge half the regular towing fee to drop a vehicle, as model legislation put forth to legislators recommends.

Nothing prohibits kickbacks to property owners for towing from their premises. And unlike many other states, Iowa law doesn't cap what towers can charge for towing or daily storage, and it doesn't prohibit towing for minor infractions such as parking over a line, parking tickets or failure to properly display a parking sticker.

Also unlike laws in other states, Iowa code doesn't prohibit cash-only demands or require towing companies to accept credit or debit cards — a common concern because many owners lack the cash needed to pay towing and daily storage fees that rack up quickly.

Those missing consumer protections are among the reasons groups like [Towinglaws.com](#), a Tennessee-based organization created by towing professionals, call Iowa's abandoned vehicle code one of the worst in the country.

The organization, which seeks to make predatory towing laws more transparent, ranks Iowa 47th in the country for its consumer protection in towing cases.

Crow insists his company has the best availability in the business for retrieving towed vehicles, with hours on both weekends and holidays. But it doesn't allow customers to retrieve vehicles around the clock, as some states require.

Crow said the company has a vehicle locator on its website (on the bottom of the company's webpage) so owners can find their cars by VIN or license number and get them released. He also said the business office and all 35 of his company's trucks are equipped to handle cash and credit cards.

"A person needs to be present with their ID and a card with the matching name, whether at a truck or at the office," he wrote. "We do not take credit cards over the phone because of persistent fraud issues in the past. In this electronic age, people can easily transfer money to each other in seconds."

Polk County attempted in conversations related to the new impound contract to address concerns about alleged cash demands by Crow Tow and make sure customers can use credit cards.

"In our kickoff meeting, Crow Tow staff explained that they take credit cards," said Jonathan Cahill, a spokesperson for Polk County government. "There was no discussion of any limitations to anyone being able to use a credit card for payment."

*Lee Rood's Reader's Watchdog column helps Iowans get answers and accountability from public officials, the justice system, businesses and nonprofits. Reach her at [lrood@registermedia.com](mailto:lrood@registermedia.com), at 515-284-8549, on Twitter at [@leeroood](https://twitter.com/@leeroood) or on Facebook at [Facebook.com/readerswatchdog](https://www.facebook.com/readerswatchdog).*