

Illinois Department Of Agriculture Announces Expansion Of Farmer Mental Health Initiatives

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SPRINGFIELD – Illinois Department of Agriculture Director Jerry Costello II announced a grant award of \$500,000 to increase farmer stress-related mental health initiatives statewide. The announcement was made at the 2021 Farm Progress Show in Decatur, IL. The Department applied for the grant in coordination with Southern Illinois University Medicine Center for Rural Health and Social Service Development and the University of Illinois Extension.

In 2019 the Farm Family Resource Initiative (FFRI) was established in Illinois to specifically address the mental health needs of the farming and agricultural

communities. The FFRI Committee consists of members from government, commodity groups, academic institutions, healthcare, and industry. Led by Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, the FFRI launched a six-county pilot program to provide resources to Christian, Logan, Macon, Macoupin, Morgan, and Sangamon counties through a telephone hotline connecting farmers with mental health resources and providers. This grant will allow for the expansion of the pilot program to the entire state.

Additional plans for grant funding include:

- Text and e-mail communication options (in addition to telephone hotline),
- increased marketing of helpline,
- voucher program for professional behavioral health services,
- agricultural literacy training for mental health providers to increase knowledge of the agricultural community, and
- further Mental Health First Aid training for agricultural community members.

“As governor, I’ve sought to make Illinois a state where mental health care should not and cannot be treated as a secondary healthcare service,” said Governor JB Pritzker. “That includes tailoring mental health resources to better support our farmers and farm families, whose industry keeps everyone else afloat. I’m proud to expand our Farm Family Resource Initiative to all 102 of our counties to ensure our rural communities are getting the care they deserve.”

“Illinois is uniquely positioned with farmer mental health initiatives already in place,” said IDOA Director Jerry Costello II. “This award allows programmatic expansion statewide tailored to the needs of the agricultural community.”

“Small farms are the core of our state’s economy, and farmers are on the front lines to provide food for our communities. The reality of this pandemic is that a new layer of stress has been put on farmers and farm families,” said Senator Scott Bennett. “These additional funds for the Farm Family Resource Initiative will give farmers the support to help recognize and navigate these unprecedented times.”

“SIU School of Medicine’s mission is to optimize the health of central and southern Illinois. The FFRI program is one the best ways to serve the region and the rural families that have been the backbone of many of the communities we serve,” said Jerry Kruse, MD, MSPH, Dean, and Provost of SIU School of Medicine. “With partners like the Illinois Department of Agriculture, we can move the health of farm families forward.”

“Farmers, ranchers, and producers give so much of themselves to produce the food that we eat and to be good stewards of the land on which Illinois agriculture thrives”, said

Dr. Shelly Nickols Richardson, U of I Extension Associate Dean and Director. “When mental health concerns affect our farmers, this impacts us all. This grant will provide the resources that our farmers, their families, and communities need to stay in good mental and emotional health as they contribute so much for so many.”

This funding resulted from IDOA’s grant application for the “Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network” funded by the United States Department of Agriculture National Food and Agriculture (USDA NIFA). Funds are provided to State Departments of Agriculture to connect individuals who are engaged in farming, ranching, and other agriculture-related occupations to stress assistance programs.

The Farmer Assistance Helpline is available 24 hours a day 7 days a week at 1-833-FARM-SOS.