

Farmer Mental Health Initiatives Highlighted During Mental Health Month

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SPRINGFIELD, IL – May is Mental Health Awareness month and also coincides with the spring planting season. Spring and fall are often the most stressful times for farmers and this year is no exception. The late start to spring has left many Illinois farmers scrambling to get their crops in the ground, causing stress to many in our rural communities.

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

Funded through a USDA grant, FFRI expanded to all 102 counties in 2021. During the last legislative session, the General Assembly appropriated an additional \$500,000 to ensure the program remains operational in all 102 counties throughout the fiscal year 2023.

“It’s important for farmers to break the stigma of internalizing their stress and understand they can ask for help,” said State Senator Scott Bennett (D-Champaign). “The FFRI program has already proven its success over the past couple of years and has given farmers the opportunity to talk about their struggles to avoid negative consequences.”

To highlight the need for mental health assistance in our farming communities, Director Costello along with members from the SIU School of Medicine, U of I Extension, local legislators, and mental health professionals are traveling around the state to promote FFRI.

“In just a few short years, the FFRI has already helped many in our farming communities,” said Illinois Department of Agriculture Director Jerry Costello II. “Providing confidential access to mental health providers while also breaking down stigmas in seeking help is critical for those working in our state’s number one industry.”

"The Farm Family Resource Initiative provides educational opportunities and a helpline to support the needs of our farm families. It is just one of the ways that SIU SOM is fulfilling its rural health mission for social accountability in central and southern Illinois," said Jerry Kruse, MD, MSPH, Dean, and Provost of SIU School of Medicine. "The school of Medicine is honored to be working with the Illinois Department of Agriculture and other ag-related partners to support this statewide initiative to champion mental health care for our farm families."

“Farmers, ranchers and producers face a unique set of demands as they work to produce the food we eat,” said Shelly Nickols-Richardson, Associate Dean and Director of Illinois Extension. “Our faculty and Extension specialists are driving significant developments in mental health resources for farmers by combining cutting-edge behavioral health science with a deep understanding of the agricultural industry. These programs, and the funding that supports them, ensure the much-needed resources are

available to farmers, their families, and communities for their mental and emotional health.”

The group will make seven stops across the state:

- May 10th – UnityPoint Health Methodist Atrium, Peoria- 10 am
- May 10th - Illinois Department of Agriculture, Springfield- 2 pm
- May 12th - NRERC at SIUE, Edwardsville- 10am
- May 16th - SIUC University Farms Service Center, Carbondale- 10 am
- May 17th – University of Illinois ACES Library, Urbana- 10 am
- May 17th - Kankakee County U of I Extension Office, Kankakee- 2 pm
- May 18th – John Deere World Headquarters Display Floor, Moline-10 am

To learn more about the Farm Family Resource Initiative visit <https://www.siumed.edu/farm>. Help is only a phone call away. If you or someone you know needs to speak about stressors on the farm the Farmer Assistance Helpline is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 1-833-FARM-SOS.