

Gov. Pritzker Announces Increased Access To Mental Health Services For Rural Farmers And Agricultural Communities

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DECATUR — Today, Governor JB Pritzker joined the Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA) at the 2023 Farm Progress Show to announce funding for a grant

program aimed at breaking down the stigma of accessing mental health services in agricultural communities. The announcement was made in partnership with the Illinois FFA Foundation and the Southern Illinois University (SIU) School of Medicine.

“As Governor, as a father, and as someone who has personally witnessed the mental health epidemic among family and friends, there is nothing more important than making sure every Illinoisan has access to the mental health services they need to lead happier and healthier lives,” said Governor JB Pritzker. “Our greatest problems require our most creative solutions — and I am confident that this grant program will simultaneously break down barriers and open up doors for our state’s number one providers.”

"As Chair of the Governor's Rural Affairs Council, it is clear how much our farmers and agricultural communities contribute to Illinois. As many in our rural communities struggle not only with mental health but overcoming stigma to seek help, our state is coming together with the Rural Mental Health Grant Program to provide the support our rural communities need and deserve," said Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton. "That is at the core of this grant program, and we will continue to invest in the efforts that uplift the needs of rural Illinoisans."

The Farm Family Resource Initiative (FFRI) was created initially as a pilot program covering six Illinois counties providing telehealth mental health access in addition to a helpline. Following its overwhelming success, the FFRI was expanded to cover all 102 counties in the state. In addition to the telehealth helpline, family members can now access six free telehealth mental health sessions.

The program will also fund up to 20 grants at \$1,000 each to support FFA chapters implementing local initiatives encouraging access to mental health resources. Grants will be used to increase awareness of mental health and wellness in schools and communities across Illinois. All FFA chapters in Illinois are eligible to apply for the grant, and grant applications will be available from the Illinois FFA Foundation in fall 2023.

“Thanks to Governor Pritzker’s leadership, FFA membership has jumped from 23,000 to over 41,000,” said IDOA Director Jerry Costello II. “This talented pool of leaders are the perfect messengers for this important task.”

The FFRI 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.

“Mental health affects people from all professions — especially farmers whose job, success and livelihood relies on many things out of their control,” said State Senator Doris Turner (D-Springfield). “Together, we can uplift the health and well-being of some of our state’s hardest working individuals.”

“With partners like the Illinois Department of Agriculture and the Illinois Department of Human Services, we are moving the health of rural families forward,” said Dan Mahony, President of the Southern Illinois University System. “Now working with Illinois FFA Chapters, we have the opportunity to expand our impact by engaging youth in a multi-generational approach to mental health and wellness.”

“FFA members are creative thinkers and know and understand their communities,” said FFA Executive Director Mindy Bunselmeyer. “I’m excited to see the unique ways our membership will look to tackle this challenge.”

Other recent efforts made by the Pritzker Administration to support farmers include:

- Investing in Future Farmers of America by paying dues for every Illinois student enrolled in agriculture classes
- Securing student participation in agricultural events by declaring that all FFA and 4-H exhibitions and events will qualify as excused absences
- Providing financial assistance for cover crop adoption through the ‘Fall Covers for Spring Savings Program’ bringing total available acres for 2023 to 160,000
- Re-launching the “Homegrown by Heroes” branding program, aiding veterans or current active-duty service members who are interested in a second career in Illinois’ number one industry, agriculture.

At the Farm Progress event, Governor Pritzker joined IDOA Director Jerry Costello to highlight the new grants alongside Dr. Dan Mahony, President of the SIU System. The Governor also stopped by several agricultural business and tents to greet community members, employees, and board members.

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