

State seeks to combat food deserts with \$20 million program to seed independent grocers

By Dan Petrella

Chicago Tribune • Published: Aug 18, 2023 at 4:34 pm



A closed Aldi grocery store in the 3800 block of West Madison Street on Oct. 29, 2021, in Chicago. People had protested at the Aldi headquarters in Chicago after the company abruptly closed the West Garfield Park store. (Jose M. Osorio/Chicago Tribune)

The state of Illinois is creating a \$20 million grant program aimed at bringing grocery stores to areas that lack easy access to fresh foods under a measure Gov. J.B. Pritzker signed into law Friday.

The program, which Pritzker touted in his budget proposal to lawmakers in February, was approved with broad bipartisan support during the legislature’s spring session, though Republicans voted against the \$50.4 billion state budget that actually provides the funding.

Under the Illinois Grocery Initiative, the state Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity will provide financial assistance and other support to independent for-profit and nonprofit retailers, co-ops, and local governments that open or preserve grocery stores in both urban and rural areas that lack or are in danger of losing them.

“We’ve too often seen large retail food chains leave these communities for greener pastures, or what they think are greener pastures,” Pritzker said during a bill-signing event in Venice, a town of about 1,500 across the Mississippi River from St. Louis. “The truth is a grocery store anchored in and run by people in the neighborhood is more likely to survive.”

High-profile store closures by Walmart, Target and Whole Foods on the South Side of Chicago in recent years have highlighted the issue in urban communities, but some rural areas also lack access to grocery stores.

The law, which takes effect immediately, defines “food deserts” by certain income criteria and whether a large share of residents must travel long distances to reach a grocery store — half a mile in urban areas or 10 miles in a rural one. A 2021 study from the Illinois Department of Public Health found that nearly 3.3 million Illinois residents were living in areas that met those criteria.

The Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity will be able to set up rules to designate other areas as food deserts based on criteria such as “poverty metrics and access to existing grocery stores.”

The bulk of the program’s funding will go toward financial assistance in the form of grants or loans for purposes such as feasibility studies, marketing, salaries and benefits for workers, down-payment or rent assistance, capital improvements, or for buying and establishing a new grocery store. Grant recipients also will qualify for other incentives such as tax exemptions on utilities and building materials.

Of the total funding, 20% will be set aside to help existing eligible stores upgrade to energy-efficient equipment.

Making better food options more available to people in low-income urban and rural areas across the state will pay dividends by improving people’s health and well-being, said Democratic state Sen. Christopher Belt of Swansea, who sponsored the measure in the Senate, where it was approved without opposition.

“The \$20 million to fund this program pales in comparison to the dollars we spend on (emergency room) visits, health insurance programs, incarceration and loss of productivity,” Belt said. “If we truly are what we eat, then the return on investment of this program should be astronomical.”

First-term state Rep. Mary Beth Canty of Arlington Heights, the measure’s House sponsor, said she was asked to work on this issue by a group of kids from Chicago who saw major chains leaving the neighborhood.

“As lawmakers, we have several responsibilities, but the most important one is to build strong, safe and healthy communities for our constituents, families and children to enjoy,” Canty said. “And this means ensuring that our communities have everything they need to grow and thrive.”

Underscoring the widespread nature of the problem, Republican Sen. Dale Fowler of Harrisburg, who represents the southern tip of the state and co-sponsored the proposal, said there’s an entire county in his district without a single grocery store.

While support for the proposal was widespread, it wasn’t universal, winning approval in the House on a 96-17 vote.

During the debate this spring, one of the opponents, GOP Rep. Martin McLaughlin of Barrington Hills questioned the wisdom of having government involved in opening grocery stores, calling the bill “absolutely one of the dumbest ideas, from a taxpayer perspective, that I could imagine.”

Despite Friday’s fanfare, many of the specifics of the program have yet to be established, and officials have not provided a timeline for when grant applications will become available.

In addition to financial assistance, the program, once established, also will provide technical support with issues such as workforce development and supply-chain management.

dpetrella@chicagotribune.com