Obesity Prevention Advocates Hail Illinois Fresh Food Fund

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Chicago (7/30/2012) — Members of the Illinois Alliance to Prevent Obesity hailed the establishment of the Illinois Fresh Food Fund on Monday.

The newly created fund was announced by Governor Pat Quinn, the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO), and IFF. The Illinois Fresh Food Fund will finance the creation of full-service grocery stores and, on a case-by-case basis, other retail models that will increase the availability of fresh food in low-access areas.

“This is a major step forward for obesity prevention initiatives,” said Illinois Public Health Institute’s CEO Elissa Bassler. “While we know that having a grocery store does not guarantee healthy eating, it’s one key component of a multi-pronged strategy. The opportunity to eat healthy foods is not distributed equally throughout our communities. When we recognize the social and economic forces contributing to the obesity epidemic, we can start to address this problem with practical solutions, like the ‘Illinois Fresh Food Fund.’”

Currently, at least half a million Illinoisans are stranded in “food deserts” — that is, they have limited or no direct access to stores that sell foods necessary to maintain a healthy diet.

“Being healthy is not just about individual responsibility, says the Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children’s Executive Director Dr. Adam B. Becker. “Substantial research provides solid evidence that where we live affects how we live.”

“In many Chicago neighborhoods, particularly in minority communities, grocery stores are very inaccessible, while fast foods are much more prevalent, says Chicago Hispanic Health Coalition’s Executive Director Esther Sciammarella. “Residents in underserved areas have little choice but to eat what is available, often foods high in calories and low in nutritional value at fast food restaurants or convenience stores.”
“Low-income, minority, and rural communities face some of the greatest barriers to accessing healthy food, which contributes to increased risk of obesity and obesity-related chronic diseases among these populations,” said Kane County Health Department’s Assistant Director of Community Health Michael Isaacson.

Advocating for the Illinois Fresh Food Fund has been a top priority for the Illinois Alliance to Prevent Obesity, a diverse coalition that had prioritized the creation of the Illinois Fresh Food Fund as one of its top three policy goals.

The Illinois Fresh Food Fund was established in the 2011 Illinois Jobs Now! capital budget bill, in which the Illinois General Assembly approved $10 million to help eliminate food deserts. Additional funding for the program comes from a $3.5 million grant that IFF secured through the U.S. Department of Treasury’s Healthy Food Financing Initiative and also from banks and foundations. The Fresh Food Fund is designed to increase the availability of fresh food in the neediest parts of the state by using market analysis, capital, and public policy to stimulate grocery store development. The public funds can be used to leverage private-sector contributions, enhancing the State’s capacity to attract healthy food retailers to communities most in need. The Illinois program is modeled after a similar effort in Pennsylvania that, since its launch in 2004, has helped finance 88 new supermarkets or grocery store renovations.

“While the Fresh Food Fund is a great victory, much work remains to be done to tackle the obesity epidemic,” Becker cautions. Policy makers should continue to look for innovative ways to transform our neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces into healthy places.”

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The Illinois Alliance to Prevent Obesity (IAPO) is a coalition of charitable and religious groups, business and corporate entities, state and local government organizations, healthcare providers, private and non-profit organizations, coalitions and citizen groups. The primary goal of the Illinois Alliance to Prevent Obesity is to ensure that trends in obesity in Illinois are stable by 2015 and moving downward by 2018 through promotion and adoption of nutrition and physical activity policy and environmental change interventions.

IAPO’s Short-Term Policy Agenda is a consensus agenda that outlines three prioritized policy goals to move Illinois closer to reversing the obesity epidemic. IAPO’s Short-Term Policy Agenda is intended to provide bold, yet attainable solutions that are on scale with the seriousness of Illinois’ obesity problem.

A copy of IAPO’s Short-Term Policy Agenda is available at: http://www.preventobesityil.org/policy_agenda_201112.html

A factsheet about why the Illinois Fresh Food Fund was a top IAPO policy goal is available at: http://www.preventobesityil.org/f/Goal_1_Factsheet_Fresh_Foods_Fund.pdf

For more information about the Illinois Alliance to Prevent Obesity, visit http://www.preventobesityil.org.

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