

Simon continues work to increase access to fresh food for all Illinois families

Written by Kara Beach
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SPRINGFIELD – April 17, 2013. An advocate for rural communities, Lt. Governor Sheila Simon today urged farmers' markets to join her in fighting food deserts in Illinois. Simon urged markets to apply for a federal grant to purchase wireless machines that accept debit and credit cards, and Link cards. The machines enable low-income residents to purchase fresh, locally-produced food sold at farmers' markets.

To date, 31 markets have received the Illinois Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) Wireless Project grants coordinated by Simon's office, and most of the markets will start accepting Link cards this spring. One of the newest recipients, EPIC Market, of Peoria, discussed its expansion plans during today's Governor's Rural Affairs Council (GRAC) meeting in Springfield.

"All Illinois families should have access to fresh, local foods," said Simon, who chairs the GRAC. "With so many Illinoisans currently receiving food stamp benefits, expanding Link access is good policy. I encourage markets to apply for the federal funding that is helping us bring healthy, local food to our underserved communities."

EPIC market provides employment opportunities for people with developmental disabilities. Approximately 40 individuals currently work in the greenhouse, and plants are sold at local retailers. The organization looks forward to adding an outdoor garden, doubling the number of workers. EPIC will hold its first outdoor farmers' market in May.

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“We are thrilled to be a part of the Illinois EBT Wireless Project,” said Vice President of Development Kristen Berchtold. “It will make EPIC market more attractive and accessible to a broad customer base, and will enable us to provide more employment opportunities and vocational training for those we serve.”

Through Simon’s EBT wireless project, Illinois farmers’ markets receive free wireless machines that enable consumers to pay with debit and credit cards, or with Link cards. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the number of Midwestern farmers’ markets accepting Link cards increased by around 65 percent between 2011 and 2012. Chicago alone saw a 56 percent increase during that period, meaning more low-income families can purchase fresh produce at farmers’ markets.

Applications for the EBT wireless project are still being accepted. For more information, please click [here](#).

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