

PARTNERSHIP AND EXPERTISE ENDS FOOD DESERT IN SOUTHERN ILLINOIS COMMUNITY

June 16, 2023

CAIRO, Ill.—Illinois' southernmost city is home to just over 1700 people and for the past seven years, those residents have been without a local grocery store, greatly limiting access to fresh, affordable, and nutritious food. On Friday, June 16, that all changed.

The new [Rise Community Market](#) is an inviting, accessible, and co-operatively owned grocery store in Cairo, which celebrated its grand opening with a special event that honored this uncommon partnership of local leaders, shareholders, volunteers, granting organizations (including the University of Illinois Foundation; Illinois Restore, Reinvest, and Renew (R3); and Builder's Initiative), [Western Illinois University's Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs](#), the UI System's [Illinois Innovation Network](#), and University of Illinois Extension's SNAP-Ed program.

Gathering Expertise and Creating a Common Vision

Cairo, and other communities that face food scarcity represent a national trend where decreasing population densities, income inequality, and transportation challenges, lead to low-access to quality nutrition. John Shadowens works for Illinois Extension in Alexander (Cairo), Johnson, Massac, Pulaski, and Union Counties as a community economic development educator and member of the multi-disciplinary [SNAP-Ed Health Equity Achieved Together \(HEAT\)](#) project, which aims to increase healthy food access, remove barriers to a healthier lifestyle, and improve child and community nutrition. Mr. Shadowens has been a collaborator throughout the evolution of the project and frames the importance of the Rise Community Market opening, explaining that “So many in the community of Cairo have come to realize through this project that their strength and resolve are the keys to rebuilding their community. Rise Community Market demonstrates that when, as engaged citizens, they decide to come together to meet a need, there is plenty of outside help and resources available to them.”

Celebrating Partnership and Looking Forward

A hearty crowd of supporters, staff, and special guests gathered for the official ribbon cutting ceremony on Friday morning to share thoughts on the legacy of this project, which first began in earnest with the formation of the steering committee in May 2022. Store Manager Robert Edwards, Assistant Manager Paul Kaina, and their newly hired staff were ready to serve Cairo residents in this brightly refurbished space, which is also the home of the **Rise and Shine Café**, the second full-time restaurant in Cairo currently.

Gabrielle Harris, president of the Rise Community Market's board, expressed her gratitude, saying, “We would like to thank the community, volunteers, and funders that helped make this grand opening a reality.” Rise represents a collaborative funding model, where “co-owners” can contribute \$100 for a lifetime membership to the market to provide fiscal stability and receive benefits. Ownership is not needed to shop, but owners do receive additional discounts on some specials and have a voice in determining the direction of the store over time.

Rise Community Market was remodeled, outfitted, and stocked by a robust partnership with Southernmost Illinois Delta Empowerment Zone (SIDEZ), Kroger, Cairo Public Utilities, Clearwave Fiber, Highway Construction Careers Training Program (HCCTP), Winkler Foods and Tri-State Food Bank, along with dozens of local

contractors and volunteers using over \$700,000 in grants from University of Illinois Foundation, R3, US Rural Development, Builder's Initiative and other donations.

Special Guests and Partners

Board Members: Gabrielle Harris, Steven Tarver, DeAngela Burris, Constance Williams, Bobby Mayberry, Maria Watkins, Marcella Woodson

Steering Committee Members: Mayor Thomas Simpson, Sheila Nelson, Tjay Purchase, Dale "Jake" Woodson, James Dumas, Gabrielle Harris, Steven Tarver, Judy Watkins, Ke'Ron Jackson, Marcella Woodson, Brittany Matthews, and the late Rodney Moore

Civic and University Leaders: Lt. Governor Julianna Stratton; USDA Rural Development State Director for Illinois Betsy Dirksen Londrigan; Senator Dale Fowler, Representative Paul Jacobs, and Representative Patrick Windhorst; UIUC Executive Association Chancellor for Public Engagement, Wanda E. Ward; UIUC Director for Community and Government Relations, Robert Flider; UI System Associate Vice President for Economic Development and Innovation, Kyle Harfst; and Associate Dean and Director of Illinois Extension, Shelly Nickols-Richardson

Major Donors, Funders, and Partners: Builder's Initiative, University of Illinois Foundation, Illinois Restore, Reinvest, and Renew (R3), USDA and Rural Development, Southernmost Illinois Delta Empowerment Zone (SIDEZ), Kroger, Cairo Public Utilities, Tri-State Food Bank and Darrell Bell, Clearwave Fiber, Winkler Foods, Bases Loaded Pizza, Highway Construction Careers Training Program (HCCTP), [Western Illinois University's Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs](#), the UI System's [Illinois Innovation Network](#), and [University of Illinois Extension's SNAP-Ed program](#).