

Request for Proposals (2024 to 2026)

Innovative Agriculture Micro-grants for Chicago (IAM-Chi)

University of Illinois Extension, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Farm Service Agency (FSA) Outreach Office and Illinois' FSA Office, announces an opportunity for urban farmers and producers, beginning farmers, historically underserved producers, and food entrepreneurs in Chicago, Illinois to apply for Innovative Agriculture Micro-grants for Chicago (IAM-Chi). These grants are designed to fund innovative, forward-thinking, and novel projects to advance urban agriculture in Chicago. Grants will support conservation practices which improve soil quality, support or provide cost-share for infrastructure and on-farm equipment, or improve supply chain issues, among other activities. Grants will range in amount, from \$1,000 (minimum) to \$25,000 (maximum) in funding. IAM-Chi micro-grants are small, one-time allocations awarded to eligible producers for short-term projects. IAM-Chi micro-grants will be available as of this date, and the program will expire on November 30, 2026.

Purpose of IAM-Chi Micro-grants

1. To advance innovative, change-oriented projects that solve locally identified farm and food production problems within Chicago's urban areas;
2. To broaden awareness of Illinois' and USDA's FSA programs and resources available to urban farmers and producers in Chicago;
3. To leverage resources to elevate capacity for urban farming, farmers, and producers across Chicago's urban food system, including beginning and historically underserved farmers and producers.

About Extension

University of Illinois Extension is the flagship outreach effort of UIUC, with over 650 staff and thousands of volunteers who offer educational programs and services to residents of all of Illinois' 102 counties, and beyond. Extension provides trusted, practical education to help people, businesses, and communities solve problems, develop skills, and build a better future. Extension professionals possess deep knowledge of state and local issues, trusted connections with community partners, and practical expertise in developing and translating research to benefit public stakeholders.

About Farm Service Agency (FSA)

The mission of USDA and Illinois FSA is to equitably serve all farmers, ranchers, and agricultural partners through the delivery of effective and efficient agricultural programs. FSA is dedicated to achieving an economically and environmentally sound future for American agriculture to provide an abundant, safe, and affordable food and fiber supply while sustaining quality agricultural communities. Illinois FSA strives to stabilize farm income, help farmers conserve land and water resources, provide services to new or disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, and help farm operations recover from effects of disasters. FSA supports agriculture and food initiatives for rural and urban growers alike.

Funding Level and Eligibility

This opportunity will support as many projects as possible, with total funding ranging from \$1,000 up to \$25,000 per project. The total pool of funding available to award is \$600,000, and these resources will be distributed across the years 2024, 2025, and 2026 to as many beneficiaries who meet criteria and submit competitive applications as possible. The IAM-Chi program is competitive, and it is expected that not all applicants will be awarded micro-grants. Only one micro-grant will be awarded to the same beneficiary during the duration of this opportunity.

The IAM-Chi micro-grants are small, one-time-only awards given to eligible urban producers for short-term projects. Proposals that require more than 3 months to complete are not eligible. The target of IAM-Chi micro-grants is for urban agriculture in Chicago, Illinois. Urban agriculture is defined as all types of farmers, producers, cooperatives, nonprofits, educational institutions, etc., working in food and agriculture in Chicago (defined as Cook County, Illinois). Those farmers and producers who serve underrepresented and underserved individuals, families, and communities will be given priority.

Awarded beneficiaries are expected to track project progress and outcomes and to provide records of expenditures with the grant program liaison (Director of Extension), provide a final report, and participate in periodic webinars, showcases, presentations, and press releases as requested. Awarding of funds is contingent upon selection through a competitive process and meeting of all post-award requirements and agreements.

Critical Issue Areas and Public Benefit

IAM-Chi micro-grant proposals should be targeted to address complex issues in urban agriculture and to deliver public benefits. Examples of critical issues include conservation practices, soil quality, water reclamation, composting, on-farm equipment, infrastructure, supply chain, and marketing, among other topics. IAM-Chi micro-grants will not support projects that trigger environmental assessments or evaluations (e.g., ground disturbance; construction of farm storage facility; land grading, shaping, or leveling; tree or root removal; pipe and well installations; or other land disturbing activities).

Information on Environmental Assessments or Evaluations

USDA FSA will comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and the implementing regulations in 40 CFR Parts 1500 – 1508, and FSA's NEPA implementing Regulations in 7 CFR Part 799 for cooperative agreements entered under the FSA Urban and Innovative Agriculture Community-Based Organization Fund. After review at the programmatic level, USDA determined that, in general, cooperative agreements entered under Section 1001 of the Build Back Better Act, Food Systems Transformation Effort do not have the potential for significant impacts to the human

environment. FSA has determined that the following categories of activities are categorically excluded from further review under the NEPA, per 7 CFR § 799.31:

- Educational or informational (i.e., outreach) activities; and
- Procurement actions for goods and services conducted in accordance with Executive Orders.

Activities identified here, and potentially other activities, will not be funded through this grant opportunity:

1. Disturbance to the ground to a level that has not been previously disturbed, removal of any trees, removal of any tree roots, or use of mechanical means to remove damaged fencing or debris that will impact below the level of previous disturbance.
2. Placement of a farm storage or other facility on a farm eligible for or listed on the National Register of Historic Places and that would have a visual impact to the historic character of the farm.
3. Modification, renovation, or removal of a structure or building that is 50 years old or older.
4. Any activity that includes new land clearing, impacts to any water body, wetland, floodplain, riparian buffer, threatened or endangered species, their critical habitat, or cultural resources that would otherwise require consultation.
5. Any activity that results in any extraordinary circumstances in accordance with Handbook 1-EQ (Rev. 3) Par. 25.
6. Changes to the existing land use or removal of the land from agricultural use.
7. Involvement of FSA actions or programs not specified in this P-850, not approved in that municipality, or for which an individual site-specific FSA-850 or environmental assessment is required.

To receive a micro-grant, the grantee must not require any site-specific NEPA requirements identified by FSA. Once this condition has been successfully satisfied and if selected for funding, the distribution and expenditure of micro-grant funds

will be authorized. Further information may be found in the Federal regulations in 40 CFR § 1506.1.

“Public” is defined as individuals, groups, or communities who do not currently have a formal relationship with urban agriculture but who may have general or vested interests in the proposed project. Grants that aim to target policy makers or governmental agencies or that disturb the land are not eligible.

“Benefit” is defined as positive change at the individual level (knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and/or behaviors) and/or community level (economic, environmental and/or social conditions).

Beneficiary Collaborations

IAM-Chi micro-grants that show collaboration and partnership with other beneficiaries are encouraged and will be considered. Proposals should provide a strong rationale for how the proposed work builds toward solutions. Applicants are encouraged to take advantage of Extension support resources including training and education during the preparation of their IAM-Chi micro-grants.

Application Requirements

The [application](#) has a five-page limit, should be single-spaced, and includes the following pages:

Page 1: Cover Sheet

Cover sheet must provide the following information:

- Project title
- Name(s) of applicant(s) and information (names, affiliations, and e-mails)
- Signature of beneficiary who will receive funds and be legally responsible for expenditures
- 200-word Abstract

Pages 2 to 4: Project Narrative

See details below.

Page 5: *Budget Justification

Please be judicious so that as many meritorious IAM-Chi micro-grants as possible may be funded.

Project Narrative

Project Narratives should be no more than three pages and include the following sections:

1. **Statement of Purpose:** For the proposed project, describe how this work addresses

a complex issue facing urban agriculture, the food, agriculture, or public need being addressed, and how the micro-grant will enhance a path forward towards a solution.

2. **IAM-Chi Micro-Grant Plan:** For the proposed project, identify the goals and objectives of the work and how this supports FSA’s mission. Discuss approaches to the work and expected outcomes. Describe any pitfalls and ways to overcome problems. Describe the location or operation of where the project will be completed. Explain the plans for sustainability beyond the terms of the micro-grant (i.e., through continued collaboration, additional funding, equipment or infrastructure maintenance, advancing best practices for urban agriculture, etc.). Be detailed.
3. **Implementation:** Describe the work to be completed. Include an action plan (chart/tables allowed) that explains team member roles and responsibilities, deliverables, time allocation, and project timeline that describes or charts completion of the proposed work. Explain how the work will be accomplished within 3 months.
4. **Innovation and Impact:** Identify how the micro-grant will innovate urban agriculture in Chicago. Describe the impact on others, including farmers, producers, and public audiences. Indicate who will benefit from completion of this micro-grant and discuss why this is important. Identify collaboration with other beneficiaries of the IAM-Chi micro-grant program, if applicable. Describe a communication plan that will inform others about this work.
5. **Evaluation Plan:** Identify methods to assess whether the proposed outcomes have been achieved. Describe how you will know that the project has been a success (e.g., dollars generated; income earned; customers identified; employees retained; improved revenue; equipment usage, etc.).
6. **Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access (DEIA):** Please indicate how your project addresses DEIA principles, underserved audiences, belonging, and/or other aspects of DEIA. Indicate if you are a beginning farmer and/or historically underserved farmer or producer. Describe any other relevance to DEIA of your proposed work.

7. ***Budget:** within the award limit (\$1,000 up to \$25,000 to be spent within 3 months), provide a budget that convincingly justifies the request for funds as evidenced by proposed activities, outcomes, and deliverables, and that is consistent with supporting urban agriculture in Chicago. Describe how you will verify that funds have been spent.

Proposed projects *must* also describe how environmental assessments or evaluations will not be triggered.

Submission Instructions

Proposals should be submitted as a combined .pdf file to Illinois Extension at jschaff@illinois.edu.

Please use: {PILASTNAME}-IAM-Chi-Micro-grant-{Year} in your subject heading.

- **Proposals will be received as of today and up to November 30, 2026.**
- Proposals submitted before or after these dates will neither be accepted nor reviewed. No exceptions will be made.

Because this is a competitive program, not all IAM-Chi micro-grants will be funded. If you are unable to submit a proposal electronically, please contact the Cooperator team at (312) 585-9128.

Direct any questions to project personnel: jschaff@illinois.edu.

Proposal Selection Criteria

The following criteria will be used by the review committee, comprised of experts in food and agriculture and University of Illinois Extension professionals (Extension Policy Committee) and an Illinois FSA staff member, to rate each proposal.

- **Statement of Purpose:** Proposal addresses a complex issue(s) closely aligned with urban agriculture in Chicago (Cook County); compelling justification of food, agriculture, or public need is provided; establishes a strong rationale for how the work builds towards a solution.
- **IAM-Chi Micro-grant Plan:** Goal(s) and objective(s) are clearly stated and are compelling to FSA's outreach mission; sound methods and approaches are fully explained and applied; expected outcomes are clearly described; pitfalls and solutions are fully identified and described;

location or operation is described in full detail; demonstrates strong potential for sustainability.

- **Implementation:** Clearly and full describes the work to be completed; reasonable action plan with timelines / roles and responsibilities provided; describes deliverables and how much time and how the work will be accomplished within 3 months.
- **Innovation and Impact:** Project demonstrates innovations in solving issues(s) in urban agriculture in Chicago; fully describes impact on others, including farmers, producers, and public audiences; indicates benefits of completing this work and importance of it; clearly describes collaboration with other beneficiaries and rationale for the partnership; includes a communication plan.
- **Evaluation Plan:** Identifies clear and appropriate methods to determine achievements; describes successful completion and measurements.
- **Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access (DEIA):** Clearly indicates how DEIA principles, underserved audiences, belonging, and/or other aspects of DEIA are included; evidence of status as a beginning farmer and/or historically underserved farmer or producer; clear description of relevancy to DEIA.
- ***Budget:** Within limits; clearly justifies costs and how use of funds will support innovation in urban agriculture in Chicago; fully describes plan for expenditure verifications.

At the discretion of the Cooperator team, top-scoring proposals may be selected to ensure a diversity of awards across Chicago to ensure that projects address critical issues relevant to diverse public stakeholders in Cook County, Illinois

**The Cooperator team reserves the right to award IAM-Chi micro-grants at amounts lower than proposed by applicants.*

Decision and Award Dates

Selection of successful IAM-Chi micro-grants will be made as soon as possible after the submission date or within 2 months. In 2024, it is anticipated that a total of \$200,000 will be awarded to successful applicants, followed by \$200,000 in 2025, and \$200,000 in 2026. Please plan accordingly. Grants will be selected and awarded on a first-come-first-served basis pending competitive review. Funding will be available to awarded IAM-Chi micro-grant beneficiaries as soon as possible after notification, and funds must be expended within 3 months of the award. Verification of expenses will be required through a variety of methods.

Contact for Information

Questions about these micro-grants should be directed to the Cooperator team.

Please send inquiries to jschaff@illinois.edu or call (312) 585-9128.

Modified January 2025



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extension.illinois.edu

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