

# Chicago Tribune

## State grant program to help businesses affected by pandemic unveiled in Matteson

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DAILY SOUTHTOWN |

AUG 18, 2021 AT 5:19 PM



*Sylvia Garcia, acting director of the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, speaks at a news conference Aug. 18, 2021, regarding a new grant program for businesses affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. (Mike Nolan / Daily Southtown)*

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Stanley Fowler's Chicago Heights-based business would distribute packages of seasoned breading for chicken and fish to some 80 grocery stores, mostly on the South Side and in the south suburbs.

"We would sell in a lot of small mom-and-pop stores," Fowler said.

But many of the stores couldn't survive the pandemic, and Fowler has seen his base of grocery customers shrink to roughly 25. "The pandemic really affected us."

But he would like to expand, and hopes that he can succeed in obtaining money through a new grant program announced Wednesday in Matteson.

The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity is making available \$250 million in federal pandemic stimulus money to businesses along with nonprofits, and formally opened the application process Wednesday.

Grants of between \$5,000 and \$150,000 are being made, and the size of the grant depends on the size of a business, its revenues and how badly it was hurt financially by the pandemic.

The money can make a difference in the lives of small-business owners, said Sylvia Garcia, acting director of state department.

Restaurants and bars as well as hotels are among businesses that will receive priority status for grants, as will businesses located in communities among the hardest hit, according to the department.

Cook County 6th District Commissioner Donna Miller said that Black, brown and women-owned businesses had been particularly hard hit.

"We are still in this crisis," she said, although "we're starting to see light at the end of the tunnel."

Percy Scott, executive director of Chamber 57, encouraged businesses to put in for grant money, noting that it will likely be spoken for fairly quickly. The group includes businesses in Matteson, Olympia Fields, Park Forest, Richton Park and University Park.

"The worst thing you can do is not apply," he said.



*Percy Scott, executive director of Chamber 57, speaks Aug. 18, 2021 about a new grant program for businesses impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. (Mike Nolan / Daily Southtown)*

Fowler said his breadding is based on a recipe he created in 1999 and perfected in the early 2000s, and that an outside manufacturer, which he declined to identify, blends and packages the products.

He has one other employee and one van, which he uses to pick up the finished product and deliver to stores including Jewel and Pete’s Fresh Market.

Fowler said his manufacturer also produces the breadding in 30-pound boxes that he used to sell to restaurants, but that those customers vanished during the pandemic.

“I want to hire a few more employees,” he said. “I only have the one truck and could use a couple more, along with drivers and I need a sales person to go out and make sales.”

To help spread the word about the grant program and assist businesses with the application process, commerce and economic opportunity department is relying on business organizations including small-business development centers and community organizations.

They include In His Hands Resource Center in Calumet City, which assists area residents in need and has been involved in food deliveries during the pandemic.

Nykoa Farmer, founder, chief executive and president of the nonprofit, said she began spreading the word last month that the grant program was coming, encouraging businesses to prepare.

Beyond just helping businesses and nonprofits complete their applications, “we are taking it a little step further to walk businesses hand-in-hand through the process,” Farmer said.

The Southland Development Authority is also helping businesses apply for the grants.

Launched in November 2019, the organization is a nonprofit aimed at fostering economic development in the south and southwest suburbs.

“We had a lot of big plans for a lot of big developments and had to pivot,” said Liz Castaneda, outreach manager for the authority.

That meant working with businesses to apply for loans through the Paycheck Protection Program as well as business interruption grants. Castaneda said the authority helped businesses apply for more than \$3 million in assistance, although she did not know the dollar amount ultimately funded.

“We are full-court-press on B to B right now,” she said, promoting the new grant program and fielding inquiries from businesses.

Farmer said she knows the region has been affected greatly by the pandemic, but that things are bound to improve.

“You can’t be in a storm that long,” she said. “The rainbow has got to be out soon.”

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