



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
Wednesday, October 18, 2023

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Key State Leaders Launch Statewide Collaboration to Combat Farmer Mental Health Crisis

ATLANTA – Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) Commissioner Kevin Tanner, Georgia Department of Agriculture Commissioner Tyler Harper and Dr. Laura Perry-Johnson, Associate Dean for Extension at the University of Georgia, today launched a statewide collaboration to address farm workers' mental health. These state leaders held Georgia's first "listening forum" with notable members of Georgia's farm and faith communities followed by a press conference announcing this multi-agency effort at the Sunbelt Ag Expo in Moultrie.

"Our commitment to addressing farmer mental health issues is unwavering. We believe in the power of collaboration and the importance of reducing stigma while creating resources that truly support our farming communities," said Commissioner Tanner. "This joint effort will sow the seeds of hope, resilience and recovery, nurturing the mental well-being of those who sustain our agricultural heritage and guide our spiritual journeys."

"From severe weather and record inflation to labor shortages and supply chain disruptions, the road to success for our state's farmers and producers is lined with challenges, and as a seventh-generation farmer, I know firsthand the impact these challenges can have on our farmer's mental health and well-being," said Agriculture Commissioner Tyler Harper. "In Georgia, our farmers and producers are the backbone of our state and our state's economy, and we're proud to partner with DBHDD and UGA Extension to make significant investments in mental health resources and awareness to ensure Georgia farmers have access to the quality mental health care they deserve."

"I am delighted that UGA Extension can be a part of this important effort," said Dr. Johnson. "With personnel in every county in Georgia, we are uniquely positioned to be the boots on the ground of this vital effort to support our rural communities and families. We look forward to expanding our efforts in health and wellness across the state in collaboration with DBHDD, Georgia's Agriculture Department and the Georgia Farm Bureau and other local partners."

DBHDD, Georgia Dept. of Agriculture and University of Georgia Cooperative Extension have invested a total of \$5.26 million for programming tailored to reaching agriculture communities since the COVID-19 pandemic. The Georgia Farm Bureau will also provide its resources during this statewide collaboration.

DBHDD has dedicated nearly \$2 million to address the growing mental health crisis in rural Georgia. Through its crisis network initiatives, \$317,000 of this funding will support educating faith leaders who often serve as a primary resource to farmers experiencing a mental health crisis. Over the last four years, more than \$1.2 million has been spent on partnerships with faith leaders to address opioid and substance use disorders and overdoses. Through a statewide marketing campaign, the Department has allocated \$450,000 to educate rural communities, farmers and faith leaders about the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.

The Georgia Department of Agriculture has made a substantial investment of \$500,000 in mental health resources and awareness using a USDA NIFA-SDA Georgia Healthy Farmer Mindset Grant. Over the past five years, this funding has been dedicated to various critical initiatives, including training, outreach, education and collaboration with partner agencies. Training efforts encompass staff and public outreach, veteran training, as well as legal and financial training. The grant funding has also supported events such as Mental Health Day at the Capitol, Mental Health Awareness Month and World Mental Health Day. Under Commissioner Harper's leadership, the Department has also amped up efforts to streamline existing state resources for farm workers' mental health and provided new outreach materials to engage the community and encourage conversations about mental health.

University of Georgia Cooperative Extension also recognized an increased need for assistance in farming and rural communities, notably after Hurricanes Irma and Michael in 2018, leading to an expansion on educational opportunities focused on farmer stress. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated stress, prompting UGA Extension to educate and expand personnel in the field and invest more than \$460,000 in this effort, along with \$200,000 in additional resources. UGA Extension formed a Behavioral Health Team with a diverse range of experts, securing nearly \$2.2 million in grant funds for behavioral health and rural stress work since 2020. Over the past decade, UGA Extension has received more than \$27 million in grant funds to support general health and wellness. UGA's "Rural Georgia: Growing Stronger" program also offers workshops, online courses and a holistic approach to improving mental health outcomes for farmers and their families.

To address the pressing issues of farmer mental health and well-being, several listening forums will be held across the state to foster understanding, compassion and support within Georgia's farming and faith communities. The forums are designed to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health, raise awareness about

the unique challenges faced by these communities and collaboratively build resources tailored to their specific needs, ensuring that no farmer ever feels alone in their struggles.

A video recording of the press conference may be found online [here](#).

****Editor's Note: A fact sheet about farmer mental health and suicide rates is attached. A photo from the press conference is also attached (From left to right: Clay Talton, Georgia Farm Bureau; Ag. Commissioner Tyler Harper; Matt Berry, CB Farm Land & Timber LLC; DBHDD Commissioner Kevin Tanner; and Dr. Laura Perry Johnson, Associate Dean for Extension at UGA).***

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