

Sen. Erpenbach: Republicans abandon small family farmers

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WEST POINT – Yesterday Republicans on the Joint Committee on Finance (JFC) neglected to act on an urgent request from the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP) to fund their farmer mental health assistance programs, in order to push off the issue until they receive recommendations from a separate suicide prevention task force.

DATCP told the members of JFC that without supplementing these programs, they only have enough funding left to help five farmers. With the data showing that the utilization of counseling through these programs has been on the rise, it is frankly indefensible to turn a blind eye.

Republicans are saying that action may be taken this fall, and that we have to go through the full legislative process in order to address this issue. However, this is a matter of \$200,000 dollars now, while we wait for Republicans to form their recommendations and propose legislation.

Plain and simple, we have the funding to do both. We have the ability to integrate the farmer mental health assistance programs into the suicide prevention task force, while moving forward with utilizing the funds that have already been designated for the programs to use. Both matter. However, we need to fund these programs now.

Farmers are struggling in Wisconsin, and giving them access to mental health care is the least that we can do. This is not, and should not, be a partisan issue. This should be an issue that we work across the aisle, swiftly and immediately, to address.

This isn't about legislators, this is about the people who elected us. Farmers are asking for our help, and the majority party's inaction yesterday was absolutely a

matter of abandoning our farmers by putting politics before their lives.