Bipartisan lawmakers propose better access to fruits, vegetables in poor, rural areas

People in poor neighborhoods and rural parts of NC would have more choices of fresh produce and other healthful foods instead of buying a bag of chips under a bill filed Monday in the General Assembly. Rep. Yvonne Holley of Raleigh is one of the sponsors.

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MARCH 17, 2015, ONLINE
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House Bill 250 would create a budget line item of $1 million for small store owners to buy refrigeration equipment and receive technical assistance. Senate Bill 296 is an identical version and was filed Tuesday.

The money would go to the Department of Commerce, which along with the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and public health workers would participate in the program.

Bipartisan sponsors of the bill and representatives of the N.C. Alliance for Health tried to give it a nudge on Tuesday in a news conference at the Legislative Building.

Rep. Yvonne Holley, a Democrat from Raleigh, said the program would save money and lives by reducing obesity, and would stimulate jobs by connecting local farmers with local markets.

"We have a rare opportunity here," Holley said.

The legislature began focusing on the issue after two major grocery stores closed in Holley’s district in Southeast Raleigh. A study committee took a closer look last year. Holley said the bill would help address one part of the issue.

"No one bill is going to solve this problem," she said.