



Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity

JB Pritzker, Governor

March 1, 2023

Governor JB Pritzker
Members of the General Assembly
Illinois State Capitol Building
401 S. 2nd Street
Springfield, IL 62701

Dear Governor and Members of the General Assembly:

The following report fulfills the statutory directive that the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) provide the Governor and Members of the General Assembly with an annual report on the activities of the Office of Business Permits and Regulatory Assistance, more commonly known as the First Stop Business Information Center. The Business Assistance and Regulatory Reform Act ([20 ILCS 608](#)) authorizes the Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity (Department) to create the office which shall consolidate information about existing programs throughout State government, provide assistance to businesses with fewer than 500 employees in meeting requirements, and perform other functions specified in the Act in order to improve the State's business climate by making it easier for small and mid-sized businesses to navigate State requirements. This goal is achieved by providing timely and accurate information regarding business requirements.

Please feel free to contact the Department with any questions about this report.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kristin Richards".

Kristin Richards
Acting Director
Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity



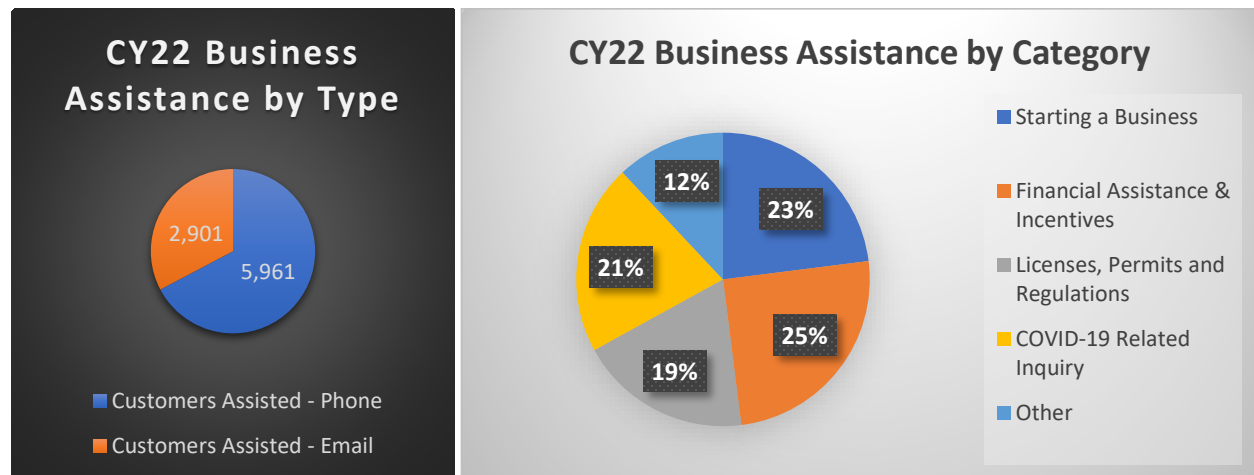
2022 Annual Report to the General Assembly

First Stop Business Information Center

(Office of Business Permits and Regulatory Assistance)

[Business Assistance & Regulatory Reform Act \(P.A. 88-0404\)](#)

The First Stop Business Information Center (First Stop) was created under the Business Assistance and Regulatory Reform Act ([20 ILCS 608](#)) as the Office of Business Permits and Regulatory Assistance over 29 years ago. First Stop provides small businesses and business startups with comprehensive information on business licenses, permits, and government regulations, while also linking them to available programs and resources to help them succeed. First Stop’s professionals help Illinois’ entrepreneurs and small businesses through the challenges and hardships brought on by the global pandemic in 2020. In 2022, businesses continued to seek assistance to aid in their recovery and First Stop helped thousands of businesses facing economic hardships to identify and determine eligibility for various state and federal financial relief programs.



Recovery and New Activity:

In addition to assisting businesses with COVID-19 pandemic recovery efforts, First Stop provided information and technical support to new businesses with questions and concerns about government regulations and assistance programs. First Stop provided entrepreneurs and small business owners free business startup kits, online access to its searchable knowledgebase system for license and

regulatory information, as well as easy to understand guides on various business issues.

Small businesses in need of technical assistance preparing grant and loan applications were connected to their local [Illinois Small Business Development Center \(SBDC\)](#) for more in-depth services.

First Stop Core Business Services:

Business Specialists:

The First Stop Business Information Center staff has over 80 combined years of guiding budding entrepreneurs and existing business owners through Illinois' regulatory processes as well as linking them to federal, state, and local government resources to help them start and grow their business. If a business encounters difficulty with the state regulatory process, our professionals help facilitate communication between the business client and State agencies to help resolve confusion and frustration. First Stop specialists work hard to dispel the common perception that government is inaccessible to small businesses. The program currently has three full-time business specialists, and they can be reached through the First Stop Business Information Center Helpline at 800-252-2923 or via email at FirstStop@Illinois.gov.

Services for Underserved Communities:

Striving to ensure equitable assistance and opportunities for success for Illinois' underserved communities, First Stop has provided a bilingual business specialist for our Spanish-speaking entrepreneurs for the past nineteen years. First Stop continues to provide its most popular publications, such as the [Starting Your Business in Illinois Handbook](#) in Spanish and links clients to DCEO's [Office of Minority Economic Empowerment \(OMEE\)](#) for additional resources and targeted services.

Online KnowledgeBase of Business Resources & Requirements:

To better serve its clients, First Stop uses Oracle Service Cloud to house its comprehensive database of more than 630 business related questions and answers known as the KnowledgeBase System. The knowledgebase was visited over 73,000 times in 2022. This

system allows entrepreneurs and small business owners to access the same business permit, license, certification, and business resource information as our professional staff on a self-serve basis and can be found on the [First Stop website](#).

Business Startup Assistance:

The [Starting Your Business in Illinois Handbook](#) is the core of the program's business startup kit. It features answers to basic questions and issues facing new business ventures. It includes a business feasibility checklist, a business plan outline, listings of essential government agencies, and other useful information. The handbook is the most downloaded document offered on our website and is available in both [English](#) and [Spanish](#).

In 2022, First Stop partnered with the Illinois Department of Corrections' Women and Family Services Division to provide 900 Starting Your Business in Illinois Handbooks for use by their re-entry counselors as they prepare individuals for return to their communities.

Illinois Small Business Development Center (SBDC) Network Locator:

Entrepreneurs and small businesses can find their nearest Illinois SBDC for more in-depth, local assistance by simply entering their zip code into the [SBDC locator](#).

First Stop Business Information Center Staff

- *Annette Fulgenzi, First Stop Program Manager*
- *Andy Evans, Business & Knowledgebase Specialist*
- *Sonia Gerson, Spanish Bilingual Business Specialist*

First Stop Business Information Center Strategic Future

In 2023, the First Stop Business Information Center is committed to assisting Illinois businesses recover from the lasting effects of the pandemic. Our business specialists will be actively engaged in healing our economy while continuing to help thousands of resilient entrepreneurs across the state access the critical programs and services they will need to rebuild and recover.



First Stop will continue its mission to make regulatory information and business resources easily accessible to Illinois small businesses and will continue providing regulatory compliance assistance to help businesses navigate government requirements. First Stop will also continue to enhance the small business client experience by continuing to improve upon a user-friendly interface and exploring more interactive tools that proactively meet the needs and service preferences of our clients.

For questions or comments regarding this report or First Stop's business services, contact:

Annette Fulgenzi, Program Manager, First Stop Business Information Center at Annette.Fulgenzi@illinois.gov