**Section 515.60 Certification and Application Process**

The certification and Application process shall be as follows:

a) Any Applicant seeking certification as a Regional Tourism Development Organization shall be certified annually by the Department.

1) An Applicant must meet the following eligibility criteria in order to be considered for certification:

A) Be a not-for-profit entity governed by a board of directors in good standing with applicable State authorities, including, but not limited to, the Illinois Secretary of State, Illinois Department of Revenue, Illinois Department of Labor, and Office of the Illinois Attorney General, prior to submitting a request for certification.

B) Have the ability to represent a multi-county regional service area as designated by the Department;

C) Employ one full time professional executive director that devotes a minimum of 35 hours per week to the development and marketing of tourism within the regional service area;

D) Possess the qualifications/experience to serve as a resource center for the counties not served by the jurisdiction of a certified Convention and Visitors Bureau, hereafter referred to as uncovered areas;

E) Have the ability to assist the Department with the development and marketing of tourism projects of the entire regional service area; and

F) Possess the ability and the equipment necessary to maintain the DCCA/Bureau of Tourism product database information.

2) To be considered for certification, Applicants shall submit, on or before March 31 of each Fiscal Year, the following material:

A) A request for certification;

B) Documentation to verify the Applicant is an Illinois not-for-profit entity governed by a board of directors and a listing of current Board Members, officers, directors, or trustees;

C) A statement that the organization will employ one professional executive director that will devote a minimum of 35 hours per week to the development and marketing of tourism within the organization's regional service area prior to receiving State grant funds;

D) A statement listing the organization executive director's training and experience in tourism development, marketing, collecting research data and reporting project measurements, and other aspects of the tourism industry;

E) A statement listing the organization's office address within the regional service area and its ability to maintain a staffed office accessible to the public between the hours of 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday-Friday, except for designated State holidays;

F) An outline of the current challenges, opportunities, weaknesses and needs of the regional service area;

G) A Fiscal Year Work Plan, with monthly timelines, describing all activities to be initiated and funded through the RTDO grant;

H) A Project Budget, based upon the allocation of funding using the RTDO grant budget form, itemizing the expenses required to complete the project as described in the Fiscal Year Work Plan; and

I) Name, title and sample signatures for those persons who will be required to authorize all account transfers, with two signatures required.

b) Within 60 days after receipt of requests for certification, the Department shall send a notice to each Applicant seeking certification, informing the Applicant of its status.

1) When a single RTDO for a designated regional service area seeks certification and has submitted all documentation, and that documentation meets the approval of the Department, the RTDO shall be certified by the Department and the Department shall send notice of the grant award and the amount of funds available.

2) When more than one RTDO for a designated regional service area seeks certification for the same regional service area, the Department's internal review committee shall conduct an evaluation of each Application in order to determine certification.

A) The evaluation criteria includes, but is not limited to, the following:

i) Does the Applicant employ an executive director that has experience and training in tourism development, marketing and other aspects of the tourism industry?

ii) Does the Applicant have an office accessible to the public, the qualifications/experience to serve as a resource center for the uncovered areas and the ability to assist with the development and marketing of tourism projects in the regional service area?

iii) Does the Applicant possess the ability and the equipment necessary to maintain the DCCA/Bureau of Tourism product database information?

iv) Does the Applicant have experience in collecting research data and developing and reporting project measurements?

v) Does the Applicant have experience in coordinating regional meetings?

vi) Does the Applicant have the capability to meet the current challenges, opportunities and needs of the regional service area included in the Fiscal Year Work Plan?

vii) Are timelines and terms of measurement identified for the Fiscal Year Work Plan?

viii) Does the Project Budget demonstrate the personnel, office location and resources necessary to complete the tasks outlined in the Application?

B) The Department's internal review committee shall evaluate the criteria using a point system with ratings of 1 through 10, using the following guidelines:

i) A rating of 1 means that the Application meets the criteria at the minimum level;

ii) A rating of 3 means that the Application meets the criteria at a below average level;

iii) A rating of 5 means that the Application meets the criteria at an average level;

iv) A rating of 7 means that the Application meets the criteria at an above average level; and

v) A rating of 10 means that the Application meets the criteria at an exceptional level.

C) The scores of the Department's internal review committee are averaged to obtain the Application's total score. An Application must receive a minimum of 40 points to be considered certified for funding. The internal review committee shall forward all eligible Applications, together with its recommendations, to the Director for final determination. During the final review process, the Director will determine which RTDO is certified to receive the grant.

3) An RTDO that is not certified shall have the right to appeal the Department's certification decision to the Director within 10 calendar days after receipt of that notice. The request for review shall be submitted in writing to the Department and shall contain the reasons for appeal and any additional tourism related information the Applicant chooses to submit in support of the appeal. The Director shall render a decision no later than 30 calendar days after receipt of the request. The Director shall make a determination based upon a review of the information and any additional material submitted by the Applicant with the appeal.