



Illinois
Department of Commerce
& Economic Opportunity

**OFFICE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP,
INNOVATION & TECHNOLOGY**
JB Pritzker, Governor

March 1, 2021

GOVERNOR AND MEMBERS OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY:

The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (Department of Commerce), in satisfying the provisions of the Business Assistance and Regulatory Reform Act (P.A. 88-0404), respectfully submits the 2020 First Stop Business Information Center (First Stop) annual report. As required by the Act, the Department of Commerce through its Office of Entrepreneurship, Innovation, and Technology provides First Stop, a statewide resource for new and existing business owners. The goal of First Stop is to enhance the state's business climate by making it easier for entities to comply with government requirements and gain access to information and resources they need to succeed.

This report highlights not only First Stop's dedication to providing comprehensive regulatory and business assistance, but also First Stop staff and department volunteers' unprecedented efforts to support Illinois' entrepreneurs and small business owners during the hardships caused by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic.

First Stop is an essential part of Department of Commerce's Entrepreneurship, Innovation, and Technology office and also serves as the first point-of-contact for entrepreneurs and small business owners interested in the services provided by the department's Illinois Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs), Illinois Procurement Technical Assistance Centers (PTACs), the SBDC International Trade Centers (ITC) and the Small Business Environmental Assistance Program (SBEAP).

Please contact my office if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sylvia I. Garcia".

Sylvia I. Garcia
Acting Director

2020 Annual Report to the General Assembly First Stop Business Information Center

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



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The First Stop Business Information Center (First Stop) completed its 27th year providing 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.

As Illinois' entrepreneurs and small businesses struggled with challenges and hardships caused by the global coronavirus pandemic, the First Stop Business Information Center, with assistance from department staff volunteers, took on the new responsibility of providing Illinois' COVID-19 business assistance helpline. As a result, First Stop requests for assistance increased nearly *1,800 percent* in 2020.

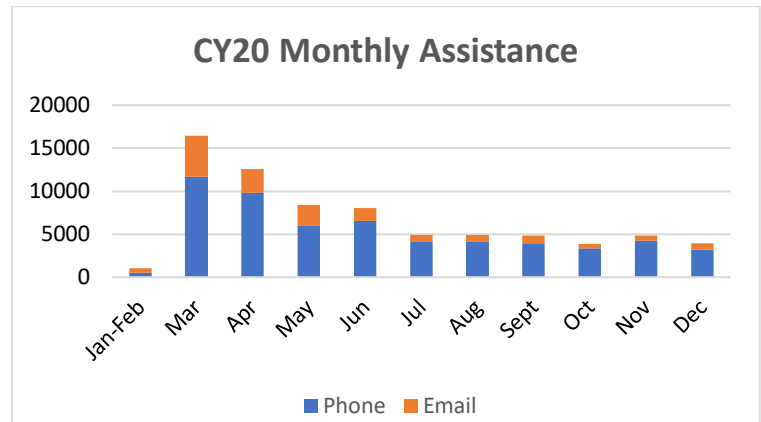
First Stop Services & Activities

COVID-19 Business Assistance Efforts:

Restore Illinois Guidance:

To support the business community, First Stop provided an avenue for struggling business owners and entrepreneurs to get timely answers to their questions regarding:

- COVID-19 Executive Orders,
- Restore Illinois Phases,
- Regional Mitigation Measures, and
- Restore Illinois Industry Guidelines.



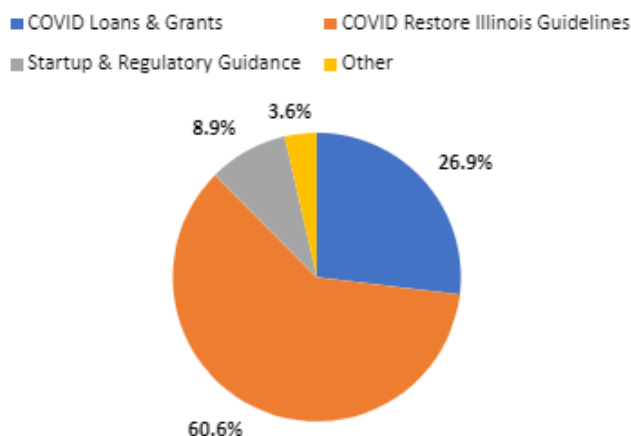
Total Assistance Inquiries	73,271
Phone Inquiries	57,536
Email Inquiries	15,735

COVID-19 Financial Assistance:

First Stop helped thousands of businesses facing economic hardships identify and determine eligibility for the various state and federal financial relief programs, including:

- Business Interruption Grants,
- Downstate Stabilization Grants,
- Hospitality Emergency Grants,
- SBA's Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and
- other disaster relief programs.

CY20 REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE



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 Services

Business Specialists:

At the core of First Stop's services is the professional staff that handles the thousands of inquiries that come in via the toll-free business helpline, email, standard mail and walk-ins. When a business encounters difficulty with the state regulatory process, the business specialist facilitates communication between small

businesses and State agencies. First Stop staff provides expert guidance in linking pre-business ventures and existing business owners to federal, state, and local government resources. Business specialists help dispel the common perception that government is inaccessible to small businesses. Business specialists 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 seventeen 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

Oracle Service Cloud Self-service Tool:

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

CY 20 KnowledgeBase Activity	
KBS Answers Online Views	53,358
Client Searches of the KBS	10,444
KBS Webform Follow-up Inquiries	920

Training Opportunities:

To increase awareness of free or low-cost training opportunities for both the budding entrepreneur and existing small business, First Stop has made a list of upcoming trainings from the Illinois Small Business Development Center Network, the Office of Minority Economic Empowerment, and DCEO's Office of Regional Economic Development available on the [First Stop](#)

[website](#). Example trainings include business management and planning skills, financial assistance programs, basic steps to starting a business, as well as preparing marketing plans and increasing technology skills.

Business Start-up 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](#).

Through a partnership with New Ground Publications, First Stop offers a variety of downloadable business management and startup guides via the Department's [Publications & Business Guides website](#). Most of these resources are also available in Spanish. Publications include:

- *Small Business Administration (SBA) Resource Guide*
- *Business Feasibility Checklist*
- *A Simple Guide to Your Company's Financial Statements*
- *The Small Business Owner's Guide to Financial Control*
- *Proposal Writing – The Basic Steps in Planning and Writing*
- *Understanding Commercial Lending: The Question and Answer Guide*
- *A Simple Guide to Your Small Business Marketing Plan*
- *The Small Business Report Card: Is Your Business Making the Grade?*
- *Buying & Selling A Small Business*
- *The Plan: A Step-By-Step Business Plan Workbook*
- *The Small Business Owner's Guide to Buying Commercial Real Estate*
- *Illinois Franchise Act and Rules*
- *Franchisor Registration Tips*
- *Before You Buy a Franchise, Understand Your Risks*

[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 Strategic Future

In 2021, the First Stop Business Information Center is committed to assisting Illinois businesses through this most challenging and historic time. Our business specialist will be actively engaged in healing our economy while continuing to help thousands of businesses across the state access the critical programs and services they will need to rebuild and recover from the aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic.



First Stop will continue its mission to make regulatory information and business resources easily accessible to Illinois small businesses, and will providing regulatory compliance assistance, to helping businesses navigate government bureaucracy and red tape.

In May, the First Stop Business Information Center manager position was filled after an extended period of vacancy. The new manager will build new and expand the program's strong relationships with State and Federal regulatory agencies to ensure First Stop is providing timely, accurate, and quality information to our clients.

In 2021, First Stop will enhance the small business client experience by building out a more user-friendly interface and incorporating 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, Manager, First Stop Business Information Center at Annette.Fulgenzi@Illinois.gov.