



**Illinois**  
**Department of Commerce**  
& Economic Opportunity

OFFICE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP,  
INNOVATION & TECHNOLOGY

JB Pritzker, Governor

# **Report to the Illinois General Assembly: 2018 First Stop Business Information Center**

Provided by the Illinois Department of  
Commerce and Economic Opportunity

March 1, 2019

March 1, 2019

TO THE GOVERNOR AND MEMBERS OF THE  
GENERAL ASSEMBLY:

In accordance with the provisions of the Public Act 88-0404, the Business Assistance and Regulatory Reform Act (Act), the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (Department of Commerce) respectfully submits its First Stop Business Information Center (First Stop) annual report. As directed by the Act, the Department of Commerce through its Entrepreneurship, Innovation, and Technology office oversees 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 they need to be competitive.

This annual report reflects the 2018 achievements of First Stop, a resource for improving the small business climate by effectively and successfully working with entrepreneurs, small businesses and prospective business owners. With a staff dedicated to providing comprehensive information on topics ranging from business start-up, financing, legislative and regulatory mandates to local demographics, marketing and international trade, this year builds on a rich history of success.

First Stop is an essential part of Department of Commerce's Entrepreneurship, Innovation, and Technology office and is the point-of-contact for entrepreneurs and small business owners interested in the services provided by the 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).

Herein is the 2018 report. Please contact my office if you have any questions.

All the best,

Erin Guthrie  
Director

## FIRST STOP BUSINESS INFORMATION CENTER SERVICES

The cornerstone to the success of the First Stop Business Information Center is its personnel and their commitment to providing professional, comprehensive customer service. Listed below are the primary services provided by First Stop:

- **Business Specialist:** The core of First Stop's services is the professional staff that handle the thousands of inquiries that come in via the toll-free business help line, e-mail, 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 provide 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.
- **Contacting the First Stop:** Clients across the state contact the First Stop through online chat, email, toll-free helpline or letters. Basic questions and requests for materials (such as the *Starting Your Business in Illinois* handbook) are responded to immediately by the business specialist. If a client needs more specific information, they are often referred to their local Illinois Small Business Development Center for assistance. Requests for in-depth assistance, advocacy and research take more time to develop a suitable response. The business specialist manages this process and ensures that the client receives a response as soon as possible. In order to capture the voice of the customer, a post-call survey is sent to the client for feedback and program improvement.
- **Hispanic Outreach:** In order to engage Spanish-speaking entrepreneurs in Illinois the First Stop has converted its most popular publications, such as the *Starting Your Business in Illinois* handbook into Spanish. For over fifteen years First Stop has had a bilingual business representative available to serve its Spanish-speaking clients.
- **Oracle Service Cloud:** To better serve its clients First Stop uses Oracle Service Cloud to house its comprehensive database of more than 500 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 at: [www.ilsbdc.biz/faq/](http://www.ilsbdc.biz/faq/).
- **Illinois Small Business Development Center (SBDC) Network Locator:** Entrepreneurs are connected to their nearest Illinois SBDC network member by simply entering their zip code into the [SBDC locator](#).
- **Regulatory Assistance:** The Regulatory Flexibility program works to make state rules more flexible, cost effective or less restrictive for small businesses. The program evaluates the impact of proposed rules and gives small businesses the opportunity to have their voices heard in the rulemaking process. The Regulatory Flexibility Program's 2018 activities are included on page 6 of this report.
- **Electronic Monthly Newsletter: "The Small Business Connection"** is a monthly newsletter that helps businesses keep up-to-date on the latest happenings related to rules and regulations, business requirements, upcoming events and training. The staff solicits input on rules during the first notice period and works with state agencies to minimize the impact of those rules on small businesses.

## FIRST STOP BUSINESS INFORMATION CENTER PUBLICATIONS

First Stop's publications are an integral part of the services provided to customers. The number and variety of publications has grown through the years reflecting customers demand for information.

- **Starting Your Business in Illinois handbook:** This handbook is the core of the business startup kit First Stop distributes. 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 web site [www.ilsbdc.biz/handbook](http://www.ilsbdc.biz/handbook) and more than 10,000 hard-copies are distributed annually. It is also available in Spanish.
- **Business Management Guides:** Through a partnership with New Ground Publications, the First Stop offers a variety of business management guides for download via the Department's [Publications & Business Guides](#) web site. Most of these resources are also available in Spanish. Publications include:
  - *A Simple Guide to Your Company's Financial Statements*
  - *The Small Business Owner's Guide to Financial Control*
  - *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*
- **Start-up Guides:** Offered through a partnership with the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University and the First Stop, these guides are designed to help startups and existing owners operate more profitably. Specific guides are available for retailing and grocery stores in Illinois.
- **Winery Profile:** This booklet is developed by the Illinois Small Business Development Center at Southern Illinois University, the Illinois Grape and Wine Resources Council, and the First Stop. This resource is designed to help new and existing wineries flourish and boost viticulture tourism.
- **Grant Proposal Writing Guide:** This booklet helps clients interested in community development understand the basic elements of planning and preparing written proposals for project funding.

## CLIENT ASSISTANCE OUTCOMES

Below are numerical measures of the First Stop Business Information Center's 2018 performance.

<b>Inquiries, by Type</b>	
General Business Inquiries and Miscellaneous Cases	<b>1289</b>
Licensing and Registration Cases	<b>709</b>
Incentives	<b>269</b>
Business Startup, Planning, Counseling and Training	<b>1119</b>
Sources of Financing Cases	<b>231</b>
Government Contracting Cases	<b>46</b>
Not-For-Profits Organization	<b>39</b>
International Trade Cases	<b>3</b>
<b>Total Number of Inquiries</b>	<b>3705</b>

<b>Inquiries, by Contact Type</b>	
Online Chat (functionality was enabled in September, 2018)	<b>133</b>
Internet and Email Inquiries	<b>1904</b>
Toll Free Help Line Calls	<b>1494</b>
US Mail / Written Inquiries	<b>158</b>
Walk-ins	<b>16</b>
<b>Total Number of Inquires</b>	

<b>First Stop Knowledgebase Website Visitors</b>	<b>55932</b>
--	--------------

<b>Clients Referred to an Illinois SBDC Network Partner for Assistance</b>	
Small Business Development Centers (SBDC)	<b>474</b>
Procurement Technical Assistance Centers	<b>22</b>
SBDC International Trade Centers	<b>2</b>
<b>Total Number of Inquiries Referred</b>	<b>498</b>

## FIRST STOP BUSINESS INFORMATION CENTER CUSTOMER SERVICE

As in the private sector, customer service is critically important. First Stop surveys its clients to determine their satisfaction on key areas including: professionalism, promptness, knowledge, courtesy, value, and saving time and money. Business specialists follow up with any respondent who is less than satisfied with the service they receive.

Comments gathered from User Feedback

### ***“How can we improve our service?”***

- 1) Great service! (KBS180109-000010)
- 2) It works just fine for me. (KBS 180117-000008)
- 3) I want to express that your representative was the 'best' I have had in my experience with any in the State of Illinois. She listened to find out my complete question and did not give me 'canned' explanations but was sincerely concerned that I was directed to the correct source of information. Attitude was patient and thorough. This representative is excellent and hope she is encouraged to feel she is appreciated and oh, so refreshing to general public. I have dealt with State of IL before and not provided good or complete info and made to feel I was an imposition and dense. Thank you for providing someone of this quality to service the residents of Illinois. State of Illinois need more of her! (KBS 180130-000000)
- 4) Promote more so entrepreneurs know of your existence. (KBS 180202-000006)
- 5) I'm very satisfied with the service. (KBS 180321-000007)
- 6) There isn't a need for improvement with regard to the service. (KBS 180427-000011)
- 7) Call was very educational. (KBS 180507-000002)
- 8) Not sure what could be improved upon at this time. (KBS 180628-000007)
- 9) Everything is great!! (KBS 180713-000002)
- 10) Service is good. (KBS 180806-000010)
- 11) Thanks Sonia! Keep up the good work! (KBS 180825-000001)
- 12) Get government to simplify rules and regulations. (KBS 181010-000005)
- 13) They were great. (KBS 181012-000003)
- 14) All is perfect, nothing to improve. (KBS 181017-000006)
- 15) Can't think of anything to improve. (KBS 181010-000010)

(For privacy, respondents' names are withheld)

## REGULATORY RELIEF AND BUSINESS RESOURCES ACTIVITIES

In addition to clients assisted with various regulatory assistance requests, First Stop also pro-actively reached out to small businesses through the Regulatory Flexibility Program. Better known as Reg Flex, this program calls for the Department of Commerce to serve as a regulatory watchdog for small businesses. Its web address is: [www.ildceo.net/regflex](http://www.ildceo.net/regflex).

The role of the Regulatory Flexibility Program is to help Illinois' small businesses bring their concerns to the administrative rulemaking process and require agencies to consider the prospective impact of proposed regulation on small entities. Reg Flex continues to advocate against the disproportionate burden of regulations on small businesses.

In 2018, the Office reviewed 406 proposed rulemakings and submitted 59 comments to the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules in an effort to reduce the financial burden and compliance requirements on small business. Through these efforts, and by bringing small businesses concerns to the rulemaking process, the Office works to save them money in regulatory and compliance costs.

Additionally, the Office publishes a monthly newsletter, "The Small Business Connection". This newsletter contains the latest on state and federal regulations, news from the resource partners that make up the network, as well as the Small Business Administration and the Internal Revenue Service, information on upcoming conferences, seminars or training, and other news and changes to help Illinois' small businesses compete. Utilizing Constant Contact, an online email-driven marketing company, the newsletter is sent to over 4,000 businesses, chambers of commerce, trade groups and associations. In November 2018, the Office of Regulatory Flexibility celebrated the 10th anniversary of its monthly "Connection" newsletter.

In 2018, the Office of Regulatory Flexibility:

- Reviewed 406 Proposed State Regulation
- Submitted 59 Small Business Impact Analyses to the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules

Businesses can contact the office with issues regarding an onerous rule or regulation. They may question whether there is a need for the rule, the complexity of the rule, and/or the extent to which the rule duplicates or conflicts with federal regulations. The Reg Flex staff will determine what can be done to offer relief regarding the proposed regulation.

## STRATEGIC FUTURE

The Regulatory Flexibility program will continue its "pro-active" approach to the administrative rulemaking process by contacting agencies during the earliest stages of the process and seeking increased industry input to ensure that all stakeholders have a voice.

## BUSINESS INFORMATION CENTER STRATEGIC FUTURE

The First Stop Business Information Center is committed to the vision of making regulatory information and business assistance easily accessible to every entrepreneur and small business in Illinois. First Stop will continue working with small businesses, providing regulatory compliance assistance and helping businesses navigate government bureaucracy and red tape. Through the strong relationships built with State and Federal regulatory agencies, First Stop will continue to work diligently to develop a comprehensive approach to decreasing negative enforcement actions while increasing regulatory compliance.

The Regulatory Flexibility program will continue its "pro-active" approach to the administrative rulemaking process by contacting agencies during the earliest stages of the process and seeking increased industry input to ensure that all stakeholders have a voice.

In 2018, First Stop successfully launched an integrated chat function to increase client engagement. In 2019, First Stop will continue to build out on this technology infrastructure. The goal will be to offer clients a range of engagement options, from personalized interactions with our Business Specialists to online support powered by AI chatbots. We must anticipate the ways our clients prefer to engage our services and work to proactively meet those needs.

For questions or comments regarding this report or First Stop's programs and services, contact Robert Kerr, Deputy Director, Office of Entrepreneurship, Innovation and Technology at [Robert.kerr@illinois.gov](mailto:Robert.kerr@illinois.gov) or 217-782-6074.