



Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity

JB Pritzker, Governor

March 1, 2022

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 the 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 existing programs throughout State government, provide assistance to businesses with fewer than 500 employees in meeting State requirements for doing business 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-size businesses to deal with State requirements for doing business. This goal will be achieved through providing quick, accurate information on existing requirements and avoiding unnecessary requirements.

Reporting Requirements

Business Assistance and Regulatory Reform Act (20 ILCS 608)

(q) Not later than March 1 of each year, beginning March 1, 1995, the office shall submit an annual report of its activities during the preceding year to the Governor and General Assembly. The report shall describe the activities of the office during the preceding year and shall contain statistical information on the permit assistance activities of the office (Source: P.A. 97-787, eff. 7-13-12; 98-346, eff. 8-14-13.)

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

Sincerely,

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

Sylvia I. Garcia
Acting Director

2021 Annual Report to the General Assembly First Stop Business Information Center

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

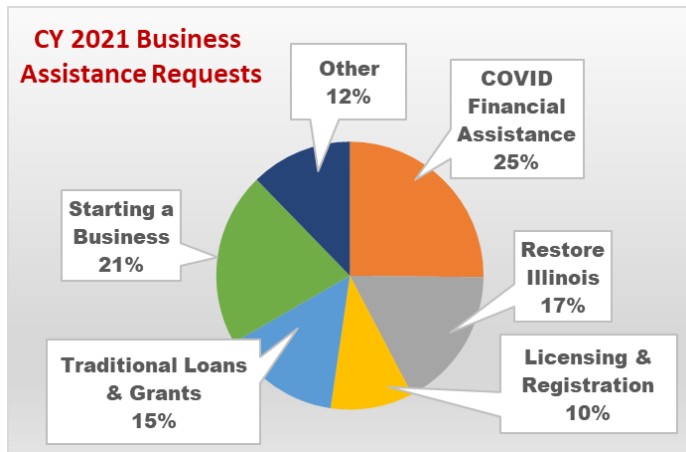


Illinois
Department of Commerce
& Economic Opportunity
OFFICE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP,
INNOVATION & TECHNOLOGY
JB Pritzker, Governor

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 28 years ago. First Stop provides small businesses and business start-ups 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 business professionals continue to help Illinois' entrepreneurs and small businesses through the challenges and hardships brought on by the global pandemic with requests for business assistance in 2021 five times greater than 2019 pre-pandemic requests for services.

First Stop Business Services & Activities

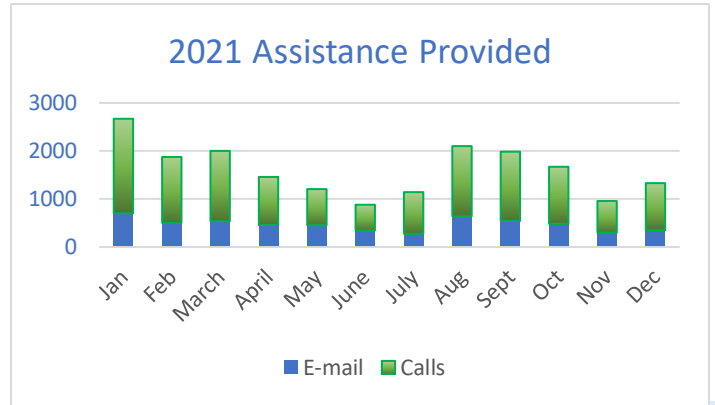


Pandemic Business Assistance Efforts:

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,
- Back 2 Business Grants,
- Restaurant Revitalization Fund,
- SBA's Paycheck Protection Program (PPP)
- Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) and
- other disaster relief programs.

In addition, our business specialists supported Illinois' businesses by providing timely answers to their questions



2021 Total Customers Assisted		19,523
Customers Assisted - Phone		13,932
Customers Assisted - Email		5,591

regarding the Restore Illinois Plan including: COVID-19 Executive Orders, Restore Illinois Phases, and Regional Mitigation Measures.

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 have 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. Our specialists work hard to dispel the common perception that government is inaccessible to small businesses. The program currently has two fulltime 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 eighteen 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

Three-Year Assistance Trends		
2019	2020	2021
Business Assistance Requests		
3,942	73,271	19,523
Business Start-up Assistance		
921	992	1,175

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 97,000 times in 2021. 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 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](#).

In 2021, First Stop partnered with the Illinois Department of Corrections' Women and Family Services Division to provide 900 *Starting Your Business in Illinois Handbook* 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 2022, 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. Illinois' entrepreneurial spirit is strong with business start-up assistance requests increasing throughout the pandemic by nearly 22% from pre-pandemic levels.

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 help businesses navigate government bureaucracy and red tape. First Stop will 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.*