



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

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

**Report to the Illinois General Assembly:  
2019 First Stop Business Information  
Center Annual Report**

Provided by the Illinois Department of Commerce  
and Economic Opportunity  
April 21, 2020

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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 2019 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 (ITCs) and the Small Business Environmental Assistance Program (SBEAP).

Herein is the 2019 report. Please contact my office if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Erin B. 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:

- Excellent Customer Service: Businesses across the state contact 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 (SBDC) for assistance. Requests for in-depth assistance, advocacy and research are handled with care. 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.
- Business Specialists: 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.
- Hispanic Engagement: In order to engage Spanish-speaking entrepreneurs in Illinois, First Stop has converted its most popular publications, such as the Starting Your Business in Illinois handbook into Spanish. For over sixteen years, First Stop has had a bilingual business representative available to serve 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 and can be found [here](#).

- Illinois Small Business Development Center (SBDC) Network Locator: Entrepreneurs and small businesses can find their nearest Illinois SBDC for more local and in depth assistance by simply entering their zip code into the SBDC locator found [here](#).
- 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 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. The Regulatory Flexibility Program's 2019 activities are included on page 8 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.

## 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 website and can be found in English and Spanish [here](#).
  
- Business Management and Startup Guides: Through a partnership with New Ground Publications, First Stop offers a variety of downloadable business management guides via the Department's Publications & Business Guides website [here](#). 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*
  - *Retail Profile*
  - *Grocery/Convenience Store Start-up Profile*
  - *Restaurant Startup Profile*
  - *Winery Startup Profile*

## CLIENT ASSISTANCE OUTCOMES

Below are numerical measures of the First Stop Business Information Center's 2019 performance.

<b>Inquiries by Type</b>	
General Business Inquiries and Miscellaneous Cases	1,433
Business Startup, Planning, Counseling and Training	921
Licensing and Registration Cases	571
OMEE Grant Program	533
Sources of Financing Cases	259
Cannabis	139
Government Contracting Cases	46
Not-For-Profits Organization	32
International Trade Cases	8
<b>Total Number of Inquiries</b>	<b>3,942</b>

<b>Inquiries by Contact Type</b>	
Toll Free Helpline Calls	1,898
Internet and Email Inquiries	1,697
Online Chat	188
US Mail / Written Inquiries	158
Walk-ins	1
<b>Total Number of Inquiries</b>	<b>3,942</b>

<b>First Stop Knowledgebase Website Visitors</b>	<b>47,137</b>
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<b>Clients Referred to an Illinois SBDC Network Partner for Assistance</b>	
Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs)	495
Procurement Technical Assistance Centers (PTACs)	31
International Trade Centers (ITCs)	3
<b>Total Number of Inquiries Referred</b>	<b>529</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.

### **Some comments gathered from User Feedback:**

*“How can we improve our service?”*

- Sonia did an excellent job! (KBS 191112-000005)
- I'm very satisfied Thank you. (KBS 190913-000009)
- Nothing needs to be improved from what i experienced. (KBS 190912-000008)
- No areas need to improve from my experience. (KBS 190819-000005)
- I'm very satisfied with the service. (KBS 180321-000007)
- All is well (KBS 190813-000009)
- The service I received was excellent (KBS 190523-000012)
- The lady who answers the 800 number and replies to email -- is absolutely amazing to work with! She deserves accolades! (KBS 190521-000022)
- Yoy are already the best (KBS 190501-000006)
- Hard to improve on what you did for me.Thanks! (KBS 190320-000003)

(For privacy, respondents' names are withheld)

## REGULATORY RELIEF AND BUSINESS RESOURCE ACTIVITIES

In addition to assisting clients with various regulatory assistance requests, First Stop also pro-actively reaches out to small businesses through the [Regulatory Flexibility Program](#), or “Reg Flex”.

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 potential impact of proposed regulation on small entities. Reg Flex continues to advocate against the disproportionate burden of regulations on small businesses.

In 2019, the Office reviewed 272 proposed rulemakings and submitted 52 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 resource partners, information on upcoming conferences, seminars and training, and other resources. 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.

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.



## **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 2020, First Stop will enhance the small business journey by building out a more user-friendly interface and incorporating a more interactive experience. 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 Kristi Dula, Deputy Director, Office of Entrepreneurship, Innovation and Technology at [kristi.dula@illinois.gov](mailto:kristi.dula@illinois.gov).