

March 2002

TO THE GOVERNOR AND GENERAL ASSEMBLY:

In accordance with the provisions of Public Act 88-0404, the Business Assistance and Regulatory Reform Act (Act), the Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs (DCCA) respectfully submits this calendar year 2001 annual report on the First Stop Business Information Center. As directed by the Act, DCCA's Small Business Office oversees the First Stop Business Information Center, a single statewide resource for new and existing business owners who have questions or concerns about state and federal business requirements, business assistance and the regulatory process.

First Stop was planned by a team of representatives from the business community, along with representatives from the Illinois Small Business Development Center Network and selected state regulating agencies. First Stop is integrated with the Illinois Small Business Development Center Network to provide entrepreneurs seamless services from startup to expansion. Designed and managed with customer service as its highest priority, First Stop seeks to be the foremost resource for information, compliance assistance and advocacy for businesses dealing with government red tape and bureaucracy.

Key Performance Measures

0Total First Stop Client Activity.....	15,251
1Business Startup Kits Issued.....	6,960
2Sources of Financing Cases.....	2,465
3Licensing and Registration Cases.....	3,544
4Regulatory Assistance Cases.....	104
5Market Research Cases.....	112
6Government Contracting Cases.....	197
7International Trade Cases.....	198
8General Business and Other Cases.....	1,772

Clients Referred to:

0Small Business Development Centers.....	3,939
1International Trade Centers / NAFTA Opportunity Centers.	80
2Procurement Technical Assistance Centers.....	235
3Small Business Technology Resource Centers.....	26

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Customer Satisfaction

0Percent of customers surveyed indicating First Stop saved them Time and/or Money **94%**

1Percent of customers surveyed indicating high satisfaction with products and services **98%**

Customer Comments From Surveys :

0Information provided very useful in providing the guidance needed to start my business. I would highly recommend this service to anyone starting a business.

1It is wonderful to know this sort of thing is available for free to us. It gives me a new perspective on paying taxes.

2Fabulous! All my first questions are answered in one place - at First stop. Thank You.

3I used the on-line services and was impressed by the fast response to my e-mail and how quickly I received the information. Also the individual who answered my e-mail was friendly -- a very good customer service person.

0I worked with a customer service representative via e-mail and he was quick to reply with answers to my question and to send me this packet. I was very impressed with his response time and professionalism.

Regulatory Relief Activities

In addition to the 104 clients assisted with various regulatory assistance requests through the toll-free Small Business Assistance Line, First Stop also reached out to serve clients through the Regulatory Flexibility Program. Better known as Reg Flex, this program calls for DCCA to be a regulatory watchdog for small businesses.

First Stop's Reg Flex staff review every state proposed rule, then publish a weekly *Regulatory and Information Alert* to business trade associations and specific businesses summarizing the rules that will impact small businesses. Both trade associations and individual businesses comment on the proposed rules. Their comments are used when analyzing the impact of the proposed rule. Written analyses are submitted to the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules (JCAR) and the issuing state agency to reduce or eliminate onerous aspects of the proposed rule. The following information is a summary of Regulatory Flexibility Program staff activities for calendar year 2001:

0488 Proposed State Regulations were reviewed

089 Proposed Regulations that affect small businesses were summarized

152 issues of our weekly newsletter, *Regulatory and Information Alert*, which is received by over **400** small business owners, business and trade associations were published

2102 Small Business Impact Analyses for consideration by JCAR were conducted

3 Attended hearings on various proposed rules where agencies elicited public input regarding the impact rules will have on businesses

4 Tracked legislation that would impact small businesses from the time the bill is introduced through veto session; maintained a log of the status of each bill on DCCA's Small Business Web page available for the general public to access

Fall of 2001, First Stop's Reg Flex Program commissioned the Center for Governmental Studies at Northern Illinois University to study how regulations impact the growth of small business as well as the impact on small business startups.

This study includes a review of regulations and discussions with small businesses to identify the issues that impact them. Once identified, the issue areas were included in a survey sent to 30,000 businesses throughout the state. The survey asks questions about regulations that impact specific industries and how they impact operating costs and level of employment.

The data will be analyzed and a report outlining the impact of regulations on small businesses in Illinois is expected in June 2002.

First Stop Products and Services

- **Business Specialists**: The key to First Stop's success and high customer ratings is the professionals 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 Specialists serve as ombudsmen for small businesses, working to find a solution that both the business and agency find mutually acceptable. The Specialists are helping to dispel the common perception that government is inaccessible to small businesses.
- **Toll Free Call Intake Center**: Calls into First Stop via the toll-free number are received by highly trained customer service representatives. The call center handles the high percentage of requests for basic information as well as mail fulfillment of the business startup kits. Requests for in-depth assistance, advocacy and research are seamlessly forwarded to the Business Specialists at First Stop who have the time and expertise to thoroughly assist the customer.
- **Hispanic Outreach**: As an outreach effort to educate prospective entrepreneurs in Illinois' growing Hispanic population, First Stop began the first stages of its Hispanic outreach efforts by making its *Step by Step Guide to Starting a Business in Illinois* available in Spanish. In January 2000, First Stop added a bilingual customer service representative to serve its Spanish-speaking clients. The bilingual customer service representative has translated the *Starting a Business in Illinois*, handbook and the *Child Care Start-up Profile* into Spanish and is currently working on translating other First Stop publications.
- **eCommerce Business Start-up Profile**: This booklet, a combined effort by the College of Business and Technology at Western Illinois University and First Stop, gives prospective and existing business owners guidance when starting or expanding their business into the e-commerce arena.
- **Illinois Child Care Resource Guide**: This publication is a joint effort between the Illinois Department of Human Services, Department of Children and Family Services, USDA Rural Development, Illinois State Treasurer's Office, University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana, Illinois Net-

work on Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs. The guide is a four-part publication made up of the following:

- **Illinois Child Care - A Guide for Family Providers** outlines the steps necessary for family providers to start a home child care program, and includes a variety of agency and organizational contacts who can provide technical and other assistance throughout this process.
- **Illinois Child Care - Developing Center-Based Programs** outlines the steps necessary for starting a center-based child program, and includes a variety of agency and organizational contacts who can provide technical and other assistance throughout this process.
- **Illinois Child Care - Options for Employers** outlines available options for assisting employees with child care, and also provides agency and organizational contacts who can provide technical assistance to employers throughout this process.
- **Illinois Child Care - Developing Community Programs** outlines the steps necessary for developing community child care programs, and includes a variety of agency and organizational contacts who can provide technical and other assistance throughout this process.

- Business and Industry Data Center (BIDC): Funded by First Stop, this integrated service provides the Small Business Development Center Network and small businesses with various market, industry, census and similar demographic data to help them make planning decisions. The BIDC and its affiliate offices handled approximately 3,700 requests for information in 2001. The BIDC was also instrumental in preparing reports and information based on the 2000 Decennial Census as it was released during the year.

- Directory of Business Profiles, Requirements and Assistance Programs: This comprehensive database of more than 450 profiles of state business permits, licenses, certifications and assistance programs has been enhanced to include profiles of the top 100 most popular business startups. It is available on DCCA's Internet Web site (www.illinoisbiz.biz) in an easy to search application, or by calling First Stop through its toll-free business help line.

- Starting a Business in Illinois (*Cutting Through the Red Tape for Small Businesses*) Handbook: This 42-page booklet, heralded by the business community as one of the most useful publications of its kind, features answers to the basic questions and issues facing new business ventures. Included is a business feasibility checklist, a business plan outline, listings of essential state, federal and local agencies and much other useful information. More than 20,000 are distributed annually, 6,960 directly to clients from First Stop and the remainder through the network of Small Business Development Centers, small business expositions, chambers of commerce, and other business service providers.

- Step by Step Guide to Starting a Business: This abbreviated version of the handbook is less expensive to reproduce yet provides a more concise and colorful publication useful in mass marketing activities such as small business expositions, chambers of commerce throughout the state, library reference sections and similar venues.

- Restaurant Startup Profile: This 46-page booklet is a combined effort by the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs. This publication is a resource to facilitate the startup process for a restaurant and to help existing restaurant owners to make decisions about expansion.

- Financing Matrix: This 7-page document comprehensively lists the business financing programs that apply to the particular needs of business owners. Available in hard copy, it is also one of First Stop's strategic initiatives for upgrading web based services.

Marketing and Promotion

First Stop:

0Direct mailed promotional and informational material to Small Business Development Centers, libraries, chambers of commerce, county clerks, mayors, regional planning commissions, local economic development offices and state representatives, senators and Congressional offices.

0Cosponsored, participated in and/or attended the following: the Illinois CPA Business and Technology Exposition; the Women's Business Development Conference and Exposition; the Illinois Librarians Annual Conference and Exposition; the Illinois Petroleum Marketers Association Annual Conference; the Chicago Business Opportunity Fair; the Women's Business Ownership Council; the Illinois Small Business Development Association meetings; and the Governor's Small Business Summit.

0Highlighted in newspapers, trade association newsletters and several magazines.

1Conducted numerous public-speaking engagements with various business groups, chambers, libraries and other intermediary organizations.

Strategic Plan

The Governor's Small Business 2001 Summit held in January 2001 led to several recommendations on how state government can improve the economic and regulatory climate for the small business community. First Stop, along with the Small Business Office, is incorporating some of these recommendations into its strategic plan and DCCA will be including some of these recommendations as well in our five-year economic development plan.

Further, a standing Small Business Task Force was created through Summit recommendations. This Task Force is charged with reviewing and advancing feasible recommendations from the Summit. First Stop and the Small Business Office are providing coordination and staff support for the Task Force.

Conclusion

First Stop has proven to be effective and successful in working with entrepreneurs, small business owners and organizations that historically view government as an impediment to business growth. It is a fact that the majority of net new jobs are created by small companies. This being so, it is imperative that government continue to responsibly lessen the regulatory burdens faced by our state's small businesses. The First Stop Business Information Center is one of Illinois' finest assets for improving business competitiveness through regulatory relief.

Sincerely,

Pam McDonough
Director

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