



Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity

Pat Quinn, Governor • Warren Ribley, Director

February 29, 2012

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 (DCEO) respectfully submits this calendar year 2011 annual report on its Business Information Center (Center). As directed by the Act, DCEO through its Entrepreneurship, Innovation, and Technology office oversees the Center, a statewide resource for new and existing business owners, the goal of which 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 2011 achievements of the Center, one of Illinois' finest 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 the history of the Center's success.

The Center is an essential part of DCEO'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), the Small Business Environmental Assistance Program (SBEAP), and the Illinois Manufacturing Extension Center (IMEC).

Herein is the 2011 report. Please contact my office if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Warren Ribley, Director
Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity

BUSINESS INFORMATION CENTER SERVICES

The cornerstone to the success of the Business Information Center is its personnel and their commitment to providing professional, comprehensive customer service. Listed below are the Center's primary services.

- Business Specialists: The core of the Center's services 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 advocates for small businesses, working to find a solution that both the business and state agency find mutually acceptable. The Center staff provides expert guidance in linking pre-business ventures and existing business owners to federal, state and local government resources. The Specialists help dispel the common perception that government is inaccessible to small businesses.
- Toll-Free Call Center: Calls into the Center via the toll-free number are handled by highly trained customer service representatives. The call center receives a high percentage of requests for basic information as well as mail fulfillment regarding the business startup kits. A large number of these calls are referred to the Illinois Small Business Development Center Network where clients can arrange an appointment to meet for professional one-on-one business counseling, assistance in developing business plans, exporting assistance and government contracting opportunities. Requests for in-depth assistance, advocacy and research are seamlessly forwarded to the Business Specialists who have the expertise to thoroughly assist the client.
- Hispanic Outreach: As an outreach effort to educate prospective entrepreneurs in Illinois' growing Hispanic population, the Center has converted its most popular publications, such as the Starting Your Business in Illinois handbook to Spanish. Since 2000 the Center has had a bilingual customer service representative to serve its Spanish-speaking clients.
- Knowledge Base Technology: The BIC KnowledgeBase System (KBS) is a comprehensive database of more than 500 business related questions and answers. This system allows entrepreneurs and small business owners to access the same business permit, license, certification and assistance program information as our Call Center but on a self-serve basis and in real-time via www.iencconnect.com. This multi-functional system replaced three archaic databases and provides the Center with greater capability in assisting clients.
- BIC Partner Locator: The KBS provides this function which will connect inquirers who enter an address, city/town/village, and/or zip code to their nearest network member. This network is comprised of the Illinois Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs), Procurement Technical Assistance Centers (PTACs) and the Illinois SBDC International Trade Centers (ITC)

- Regulatory Flexibility Program: The “Reg Flex” staff examines proposed rules and regulations affecting the small business community and through impact analyses recommends ways of making the rules more flexible, cost effective or less restrictive for small business. The Regulatory Flexibility Program’s 2011 activities are included on page 8 of this report.
- Electronic Monthly Newsletter: The montly “**Connection**” newsletter helps businesses keep up-to-date on the latest happenings with regard to rules and regulations, business requirements, upcoming events and training. Solicits input on rules during the first notice period and works with state agencies to minimize the impact of those rules on small businesses.

BUSINESS INFORMATION CENTER PUBLICATIONS

The Business Information Center's publications are an integral part of the services provided to customers. The number and variety of publications has grown through the years reflecting customer demands for information.

- Starting Your Business in Illinois handbook: This 42-page booklet is the core of the business startup kit BIC sends out and is heralded by the business community as one of the most useful publications of its kind. It features answers to basic questions and issues facing new business ventures, it also includes a business feasibility checklist; a business plan outline; listings of essential state, federal and local agencies; and other useful information. The handbook is the most downloaded document offered on our web site: www.ienconnect.com/handbook and more than 15,000 hard-copies are distributed annually. It is also available in Spanish.
- Illinois Child Care Resource Guide: As a part of DCEO's highly successful Day Care Initiative, the Center collaborated with other state and federal agencies, the Illinois State Treasurer's Office, the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, and the Illinois Network on Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies to create this valuable resource guide. The guide is a four-part publication:
 - **A Guide for Family Providers** outlines the steps necessary for family providers to start a home child care program
 - **Developing Center-Based Programs** outlines the steps necessary for starting a center-based child program
 - **Options for Employers** outlines available options for companies assisting employees with child care
 - **Developing Community Programs** outlines the steps necessary for developing community child care programs
- Child Care Start-up Profile: This 29-page booklet, written and produced by the Center, is a straight-forward guide for starting a day care. It is separated into two sections, one geared toward those hoping to establish a home child care business and the other for those establishing a larger scale child care center. It is also available in Spanish
- Proposal Writing Guide: To meet the demand from individuals interested in starting a nonprofit organization but having no resources to turn to, the Center offers this 52-page booklet to help nonprofit community program developers and planners with the basic elements and concepts in planning and preparing winning proposals for project funding.
- eCommerce Business Start-up Profile: This booklet, a combined effort by Braddock Communications, Inc., the College of Business and Technology at Western Illinois University and the Center, gives prospective and existing business owners guidance when starting or expanding their business into the e-commerce arena.
- Restaurant Start-up 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 Economic Opportunity. It is a resource to facilitate startup or help existing restaurant owners operate more profitably. This is available in Spanish also.

- Grocery/Convenience Store Profile: This 38-page booklet is a combined effort by the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. It is a resource to facilitate startup or help existing store owners operate more profitably.
- Business Management Guides: Through a partnership with New Ground Publications, the Center and the Illinois Small Business Development Center have made 8 management guides available via DCEO's web site. These management guides are available in Spanish also:
 - 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
- Winery Profile: This 67-page booklet is a combined effort by Illinois Small Business Development Center at Southern Illinois University, Illinois Grape and Wine Resources Council and the Business Information Center. This profile complements the State's current efforts to increase a growing industry in Illinois and to boost tourism.

**BUSINESS INFORMATION CENTER
CLIENT ASSISTANCE PERFORMANCE**

What has the Business Information Center accomplished in 2011? Below are numerical measures of the Center's performance.

Type of Inquiries Handled:

CY2011

• General Business Inquiries and Other Cases	3,144
• Licensing and Registration Cases	1,274
• Business Startup Inquiries	788
• Sources of Financing Cases	1,056
• Business Planning, Counseling and Training	259
• Government Contracting Cases	143
• Not-For-Profits Organization	83
• Small Business Job Creation Tax Credit	693
• International Trade Cases	17

Where Clients Were Referred to:

• Small Business Development Centers (SBDC)	1,305
• Procurement Technical Assistance Centers	101
• SBDC International Trade Centers	7

How Clients Reached the BIC:

• Toll Free Help Line Calls	5,042
• Internet and Business Portal Inquiries	2,170
• US Mail / Written Inquiries	230
• Walk-ins	<u>14</u>
• Total BIC Client Activity	7,457

BUSINESS INFORMATION CENTER CUSTOMER SERVICE

As in the private sector, the leading edge goes to the organizations that strive for and provide superior customer service. Instituted early in its beginning, the Center 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. The Center's recent survey results are consistent with past years.

- **Percent of customers surveyed indicating the BIC saved them time and/or money** **91%**
(317 out of 349 total responses)
- **Percent of customers surveyed indicating a high degree of satisfaction with products and services** **94%**
(2,679 out of 2,843 total responses)

How can we improve our service? Here are some of the Center's customer comments.
(For privacy respondents names are withheld)

"Great job! My rep was Amazing." - R. L.

"I really could not ask for a more helpful, nicer person. You're lucky because we could use more people like Diana in other State Agencies. She is awesome! God Bless." - R. S. M.

"Sonia was very helpful. Exemplary service!" - A. C..

"It's Great! Keep up the good work" - F. H.

"You can't, the woman that answered, gave me answers to questions that I didn't know I needed to ask. She was very helpful." - T. G.

"I found your staff very helpful and didn't see anything you need to change." - J. B.

"Sonia was fantastic! I can't think of any way to improve! I'm very grateful for her help. Thanks a million!" - A. A.

"You're doing everything just fine. Diana was very helpful." - K. B.

"The lady I talked with was very nice and helpful. I dont have any complaints." - P.S.

BUSINESS INFORMATION CENTER REGULATORY RELIEF AND BUSINESS RESOURCES ACTIVITIES

In addition to clients assisted with various regulatory assistance requests, the BIC also proactively reached out to small businesses through the Regulatory Flexibility Program. Better known as Reg Flex, this program calls for DCEO to serve as a regulatory watchdog for small businesses. Its web address is: www.ienconnect.com/regflex.

Helping Illinois' small businesses bring their concerns to the rulemaking process and requiring agencies to consider the prospective impact of proposed regulation on small entities is the role of the Office of Regulatory Flexibility (Reg Flex). Reg Flex continues to advocate against the disproportionate burden of regulations on small businesses.

In 2011, the Office reviewed proposed rulemakings and submitted 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, as well as implementing a new online form to register regulatory complaints, the Office works to save small businesses money in regulatory and compliance costs.

Additionally, the office publishes a monthly newsletter. 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, the newsletter is sent to over 2,000 businesses, chambers of commerce, trade groups and associations. In November 2011, the Office of Regulatory Flexibility celebrated the three-year anniversary of its monthly "Connection" newsletter.

In 2011, the Office of Regulatory Flexibility:

- *383 Proposed State Regulations were reviewed.*
- *94 Small Business Impact Analyses for consideration by JCAR were conducted.*

Through Reg Flex businesses have a venue to file a formal complaint regarding an onerous rule or regulation. Businesses can question whether there is a need for the rule, the complexity of the rule, the extent to which the rule duplicates or conflicts with federal regulations. Businesses are able to file the complaint online, and the Regulatory Flexibility staff will determine what can be done to offer relief to the businesses with regard to the regulation. A copy of this online complaint form can be found at www.ienconnect.com.

STRATEGIC FUTURE

The Business Information Center remains steadfast in its commitment to being the foremost resource for information, compliance assistance and advocacy for businesses dealing with government red tape and bureaucracy.

The mission of the Business Information Center is to focus on the removal of impediments to business growth by making the government regulatory process less burdensome and easier to navigate. The Center continues to develop stronger advocacy ties to the State's regulating agencies in order to develop a comprehensive approach to decreasing negative enforcement action while increasing regulatory compliance.

In addition, the Office of Regulatory Flexibility will continue its "pro-active" approach to the rulemaking process, by contacting agencies during the earliest stages of the rulemaking process and allowing for more industry input.

Over the last few years our clients experienced a dramatic upgrade in their ability to access regulatory and business assistance information via our KBS. In 2012 access to the Center's knowledgebase will be available on the DCEO homepage. Our staff will continue its work on extensively building up and enhancing its knowledgebase content to include more federal and local regulatory information.

Marketing will intensify, by reaching out to regulatory agencies and partnering with them to visibly display the Center's contact information on their websites. In doing so, the Center will reach a broader audience and ensure that more small business owners become aware and take advantage of the services not only offered by our network partners but by the entire State of Illinois.

For questions or comments regarding this report or the Center's programs and services, contact Darryl Thomas, Interim Manager, 217-785-6190.