



Illinois
Department of Commerce
& Economic Opportunity

Bruce Rauner, Governor

Report to the Illinois General Assembly:
2016 First Stop Business Information Center

Provided by the Illinois Department of Commerce and
Economic Opportunity

March 1, 2017



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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 2016 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 2016 report. Please contact my office if you have any questions.

All the best,

Sean McCarthy
Acting 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 Specialists: The core of First Stop'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 specialist facilitates communication between small businesses and State agencies. First Stop's 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.
- Toll-Free Call Center: Calls into First Stop via the toll-free number are handled by highly trained business 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, 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: In order 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. 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/.
- 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 this system. [Locator](#)
- 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 2016 activities are included on page 5 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 with regard 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 45-page booklet 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 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, First Stop and the Illinois SBDC Network have made 16 management guides available via Department of Commerce's web site. These management guides are also available in Spanish:
 - 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
- 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. It is a resource to facilitate startup or help existing restaurant owners operate more profitably. It is also available in Spanish.
- 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. It is a resource to facilitate startup or help existing store owners operate more profitably.
- 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 First Stop. This profile complements the State's current efforts to increase a growing industry in Illinois and to boost tourism.
- Proposal Writing Guide: To meet the demand from individuals interested in starting a nonprofit organization but not knowing where turn to, First Stop offers this 52-page booklet to help nonprofit community program developers and planners with the basic elements and concepts in planning and preparing written proposals for project funding.

**FIRST STOP BUSINESS INFORMATION CENTER
CLIENT ASSISTANCE PERFORMANCE**

Below are numerical measures of the First Stop Business Information Center's 2016 performance.

Type of Inquiries Handled:	CY2016
• General Business Inquiries and Miscellaneous Cases	2,286
• Licensing and Registration Cases	864
• Incentives	5,071
• Business Startup, Planning, Counseling and Training	665
• Sources of Financing Cases	181
• Government Contracting Cases	43
• Not-For-Profits Organization	44
• International Trade Cases	<u>3</u>
Total Number of First Stop Clients Served	9,157
Clients Referred to a Specific Illinois SBDC Network Partner for Assistance:	
• Small Business Development Centers (SBDC)	389
• Procurement Technical Assistance Centers	24
• SBDC International Trade Centers	2
How Clients Reached First Stop:	
• Toll Free Help Line Calls	2,144
• Internet and Email Inquiries	6,915
• US Mail / Written Inquiries	96
• Walk-ins	<u>2</u>
Total Client Activity	9,157

FIRST STOP BUSINESS INFORMATION CENTER CUSTOMER SERVICE

As in the private sector, the leading edge goes to the organization that provides exceptional customer service. 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. First Stop's recent survey results are consistent with past years.

- **Percent of customers surveyed indicating First Stop saved them time and/or money** **95%**
(37 out of 39 total responses)
- **Percent of customers surveyed indicating a high degree of satisfaction with products and services** **98%**
(320 out of 325 total responses)

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

"It was excellent. She, Sonia, was excellent!" - KBS#160113-000013

"Everyone was very helpful. Keep doing what you are doing." – KBS#150929-000030

"Answered my questions, sot was as useful as could be. Fast reply." – KBS#160301-000025

"More people like Sonia. Very helpful." –KBS#160201-000033

**FIRST STOP BUSINESS INFORMATION CENTER
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.ilsmallbiz.biz/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 2016, 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, 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 3,500 businesses, chambers of commerce, trade groups and associations. In November 2016, the Office of Regulatory Flexibility celebrated the 8th anniversary of its monthly "Connection" newsletter.

In 2016, the Office of Regulatory Flexibility accomplished the following:

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

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 First Stop Business Information Center will continue working with small businesses, providing regulatory compliance assistance and helping businesses navigate government bureaucracy and red tape.

First Stop is committed to the vision of making regulatory information and business assistance easily accessible to every entrepreneur and small business in Illinois.

In accordance with the provisions of Civil Administrative Code 20 ILCS 605/605-1007, the Illinois Department of Commerce is required to create and maintain a website to assist individuals wishing to create new businesses or relocate businesses to Illinois. In 2017, First Stop will focus its efforts on helping launch this website. This project, known as the State of Illinois' One Stop Business Permitting Portal, will facilitate First Stop's mission of removing obstacles to business growth by making the government regulatory process less burdensome and easier to navigate.

It is our hope over the next year that Illinois' small business community will experience a dynamic upgrade in its ability to access regulatory information and business assistance. It is our goal to prominently display a link to the One Stop Business Permitting Portal on the Department of Commerce's homepage. Our staff will work with liaisons from all state agencies to ensure that the One Stop Business Portal content is accurate, up-to-date, and replete. Eventually we will focus on the inclusion of federal and local regulatory and business related information.

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.

It is also our hope that program marketing will intensify by reaching out to regulatory agencies and partnering with them to visibly display a link to the One Stop Business Permitting Portal on their websites. In doing so, we will reach a broader audience ensuring that more small business owners utilize the vast small business resources and services offered by our office, network partners, and the entire State of Illinois.

For questions or comments regarding this report or First Stop's programs and services, contact Ericka Perkins, Manager of the First Stop Business Information Center, at 217.785.6190.