



Illinois
Department of Commerce
& Economic Opportunity

Bruce Rauner, Governor

Report to the Illinois General Assembly:
2017 First Stop Business Information Center

Provided by the Illinois Department of Commerce and
Economic Opportunity

March 1, 2018



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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 2017 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 2017 report. Please contact my office if you have any questions.

All the best,

Sean McCarthy
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 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: 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 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 2017 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 for download via the 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 2017 performance.

Type of Inquiries Handled:	CY2017
• General Business Inquiries and Miscellaneous Cases	1,481
• Licensing and Registration Cases	647
• Incentives	1,801
• Business Startup, Planning, Counseling and Training	844
• Sources of Financing Cases	197
• Government Contracting Cases	77
• Not-For-Profits Organization	31
• International Trade Cases	<u>5</u>
Total Number of Inquiries Handled	5,083

Clients Referred to a Specific Illinois SBDC Network Partner for Assistance:	
• Small Business Development Centers (SBDC)	495
• Procurement Technical Assistance Centers	34
• SBDC International Trade Centers	12

How Clients Reached First Stop:	
• Toll Free Help Line Calls	1,023
• Internet and Email Inquiries	3,978
• US Mail / Written Inquiries	80
• Walk-ins	<u>2</u>
Total Client Activity	5,083

The First Stop Knowledgebase Website received 65,406 visitors during CY2017.

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.

- **Percent of customers surveyed indicating First Stop saved them time and/or money** **84%**
(59 out of 70 total responses)
- **Percent of customers surveyed indicating a high degree of satisfaction with products and services** **94%**
(545 out of 579 total responses)

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

"Service was beyond great!!!"- KBS#170118-000008

"Keep doing what you are doing." – KBS#171122-000015

"Make applying easy with one click button." – KBS#170124-000012

"Points of contact for each program should be clearly identified on the website...." KBS#170323-000014

"I am satisfied with the service I received." – KBS#171103-000001

"Nothing. It was perfect and the woman was great!!!!" –KBS#170404-000007

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 2017, 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 2017, the Office of Regulatory Flexibility celebrated the 9th anniversary of its monthly "Connection" newsletter.

In 2017, the Office of Regulatory Flexibility:

- Reviewed **354** Proposed State Regulations
- Submitted **54** Small Business Impact Analyses to the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules

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 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 2018, First Stop will continue to incorporate the proven principles learned during a 2017 training provided through the Office of Rapid Results focused on continuous improvement. Through this initiative, First Stop is working to improve the utilization and marketing of its KnowledgeBase system (KBS). It is our hope that these continued improvements will ensure our services reach a broader audience and empower more small business owners to 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 217.782.5349.