



**Illinois
Department of Commerce
& Economic Opportunity**

Bruce Rauner, Governor

February 27, 2015

TO THE GOVERNOR AND MEMBERS OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY:

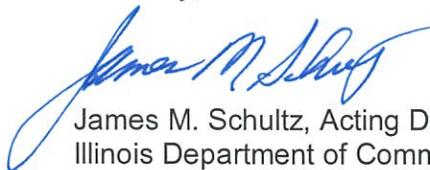
In accordance with the provisions of the Public Act 88-0404, the Business Assistance and Regulatory Reform Act (Act), the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) respectfully submits this calendar year 2014 annual report on its First Stop Business Information Center (First Stop). As directed by the Act, DCEO through its Entrepreneurship, Innovation, and Technology office oversees First Stop, a statewide resource for new and existing business owners. The goal 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 2014 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 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) and the Small Business Environmental Assistance Program (SBEAP).

Herein is the 2014 report. Please contact my office if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



James M. Schultz, Acting Director
Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity

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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 First Stop's primary services.

- 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, the Center has converted its most popular publications, such as the Starting Your Business in Illinois handbook to Spanish. For over fifteen years First Stop has served Spanish-speaking clients by providing bilingual business representatives.
- Knowledgebase Technology: First Stop's 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 the "**Search for Answers**" link on: www.ilsbdc.biz.
- First Stop Partner Locator: This system will connect inquirers who enter a city or zip code to their nearest Illinois SBDC network member.
- 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 2014 activities are included on page 6 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. 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 42-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.ilsmallbiz.biz/handbook and more than 15,000 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 have made 16 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 Commerical Real Estate
- Child Care Start-up Profile: This 29-page booklet, written and produced by First Stop, 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.
- 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. 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 and Economic Opportunity. 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 winning proposals for project funding.

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

Below are numerical measures of the First Stop Business Information Center's 2014 performance.

Type of Inquiries Handled:	CY2014
• General Business Inquiries and Miscellaneous Cases	2,627
• Licensing and Registration Cases	1,681
• Small Business Job Creation Tax Credit	572
• Business Startup, Planning, Counseling and Training	528
• Sources of Financing Cases	397
• Government Contracting Cases	66
• Not-For-Profits Organization	45
• International Trade Cases	<u>10</u>
Total Number of First Stop Clients Served	5,926

Clients Referred to a Specific Illinois SBDC Network Partner for Assistance:

• Small Business Development Centers (SBDC)	433
• Procurement Technical Assistance Centers	31
• SBDC International Trade Centers	5

How Clients Reached First Stop:

• Toll Free Help Line Calls	3,107
• Internet and Email Inquiries	2,608
• US Mail / Written Inquiries	194
• Walk-ins	<u>17</u>
Total Client Activity	5,926

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** **93%**
(127 out of 137 total responses)
- **Percent of customers surveyed indicating a high degree of satisfaction with products and services** **94%**
(904 out of 964 total responses)

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

"From the short time I was on the phone, there are no improvements. She was awesome!"
-140813-000040

"I'm very happy with the service that I received. Thank you." - 140930-000014

"Very good as is -- very personable and knowledgeable staff!" -140910-000034

"The person I spoke with could not have been any more helpful! She was kind and went out of her way to give me advise. I really appreciated this." -140918-000017

"I received excellent service, today! Lynnette was "top Shelf" and she deserves a promotion!" – 140930-000025

"Can't - the service provided is always exceptional!!!" – 141003-000017

"I was very impressed by the willingness to help and information provided, I can't think of much area for improvement." - 141028-000023

"This service is a great contact, and is looking good thus far!" – 141031-000012

"Sonia was very helpful!" – 141106-000023

"My initial call was handled promptly and professionally. I was impressed and satisfied." – 141120-000004

FIRST STOP BUSINESS INFORMATION CENTER REGULATORY RELIEF AND BUSINESS RESOURCES ACTIVITIES

In addition to clients assisted with various regulatory assistance requests, First Stop 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.ilsmallbiz.biz/regflex.

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

In 2014 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 2014 the Office of Regulatory Flexibility celebrated the sixth anniversary of its monthly "Connection" newsletter.

In 2014, the Office of Regulatory Flexibility accomplished the following:

- **381** Proposed State Regulations were reviewed.
- **100** 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 Reg Flex staff will determine what can be done to offer relief regarding the proposed regulation. Reg Flex's online complaint form can be found at: www.ilsmallbiz.biz/regflex.

STRATEGIC FUTURE

The First Stop Business Information Center remains committed to its vision of becoming the first place entrepreneurs and small businesses look to for regulatory information and business assistance. First Stop will continue working with small businesses, providing compliance assistance and helping businesses deal with government bureaucracy and red tape.

First Stop's mission is focused on removing obstacles to business growth by making the government regulatory process less burdensome and easier to navigate. First Stop will focus its efforts on developing stronger ties within regulatory agencies, working diligently to develop a comprehensive approach to decreasing negative enforcement actions while increasing regulatory compliance.

The Reg Flex program will continue its "pro-active" approach to the administrative rulemaking process by contacting agencies during the earliest stages of the process and allowing for increased industry input.

It is our hope that over the next year our clients will experience a dramatic upgrade in their ability to access regulatory information and business assistance from First Stop. It continues to be our goal in 2015 that access to First Stop's knowledgebase will be prominently displayed on the DCEO homepage. Our staff will continue its work on extensively building up and enhancing its content to include more federal and local regulatory and business related information.

It is also our hope that program marketing will intensify by reaching out to regulatory agencies and partnering with them to visibly display First Stop's contact information on their websites. In doing so, First Stop will reach a broader audience ensuring that more small business owners become aware and take advantage of the services offered by our office, network partners, and the entire State of Illinois.

For questions or comments regarding this report or the Center's programs and services, contact Darryl Thomas, First Stop Business Information Center, Client Services Manager at 217-785-6190.