



Illinois
Department of Commerce
& Economic Opportunity
JB Pritzker, Governor

2025

Annual Report to the General Assembly

Economic Empowerment Centers (EEC)

Reporting Period: June 2024 – September 2025

Office of Economic Equity & Empowerment

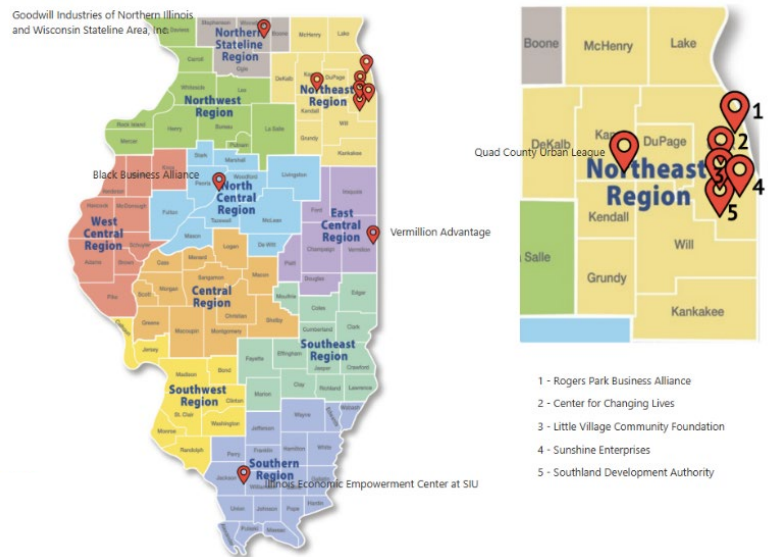
Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity

Program Overview

The Illinois Economic Empowerment Center (EEC) Program provides training in the principles and practice of entrepreneurship to prepare individuals, including minorities, women, individuals with a disability, dislocated workers, veterans, and youth entrepreneurs to pursue self-employment and/or a business enterprise opportunity. EECs provide training in all aspects of business development and small business management.

Pursuant to [20 ILCS 605/605-5031](#), the purpose of the EEC Program is to provide grants to eligible career education agencies and not-for-profit corporations that offer technical assistance, training, and access to resources necessary to start-ups or existing businesses including, but not limited to, Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Individual (SEDI) business owners and/or Very Small Businesses (VSBs), entrepreneurs, and/or dislocated workers. By allocating funds to EECs, the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity's (DCEO) Office of Economic Equity & Empowerment (OE3) aims to create an inclusive and welcoming business ecosystem for communities that have traditionally faced systemic barriers to entry and growth, including, without limitations, communities that have historically been marginalized, discriminated against, underrepresented and those who have been justice-involved. Program funding allows EECs in economically distressed areas and Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) investment areas to substantially impact these communities by expanding on existing partnerships, providing targeted outreach and support, and developing culturally competent training programs and initiatives to support the program participants.

The EEC program demonstrates a strong commitment to serving diverse and underserved populations across the state. Though programming is open to all Illinois entrepreneurs, participating agencies prioritize outreach to minority entrepreneurs by offering culturally relevant, bilingual programming, and partnering with local organizations to build trust and accessibility.



Through this program, DCEO selected 10 agencies across Illinois to serve as Economic Empowerment Centers (EECs).

Awardee	Location	Grant Amount
Black Business Alliance Peoria	Peoria	\$250,000
Board of Trustees of Southern IL University – SIU Carbondale	Carbondale	\$250,000
Center for Changing Lives	Chicago	\$250,000
Chicago’s Sunshine Enterprises, Inc.	Chicago	\$250,000

DevCorp North dba Rogers Park Business Alliance	Chicago	\$250,000
Goodwill Industries of Northern Illinois and Wisconsin Stateline Area, Inc.	Rockford	\$250,000
Little Village Community Foundation Corp	Chicago	\$250,000
Quad County Urban League	Aurora	\$250,000
Southland Development Authority	Tinley Park	\$250,000
Vermillion Advantage NFP	Danville	\$250,000

Key Metrics & Accomplishments

Since June 2024, the Economic Empowerment Centers successfully designated program directors, created and implemented technical assistance programming, and successfully recruited entrepreneurs through various outreach measures. These efforts led to the hosting of 372 seminars/workshops in multiple languages, the training of 644 entrepreneurs through cohort-based training, and providing 1,154 entrepreneurs with tailored 1:1 business advising.

Seminars/Workshops

372

Cohort Graduates

644

Entrepreneurs
Received 1:1 Advising

1154

431

Business
Plans have
been
developed

412

Marketing
Plans were
created

179

Entrepreneurs
have
presented to
potential
investors

To date, 431 business plans have been developed, 412 marketing plans were created, and 179 entrepreneurs have presented their businesses to potential investors.

New Businesses and Job Creation/Retention

The EEC network has demonstrated meaningful success in supporting entrepreneurs to launch new businesses and move from idea to implementation. In FY25 and Q1 of FY26, 66 new businesses were launched, with many more in the pipeline receiving critical support to move toward formal business formation. This program has also contributed to the creation of 128 jobs and the retention of 510 jobs. These outcomes reflect the program's strong impact in fostering entrepreneurship, job creation, and economic inclusion across Illinois.

Helped
Launch
66
New
Businesses

128
Jobs
Created

510
Jobs
Retained

Target Beneficiaries

Women are a key demographic across the EEC network. Cohorts such as the Community Business Academy (CBA) led by Sunshine Enterprises see a majority of women entrepreneur graduates, and cover topics such as budgeting, marketing, and bookkeeping among other financial skills. Events like SheInspire, hosted by the Southland Development Authority, provide an avenue for women entrepreneurs to connect and exchange ideas, strategies, and success stories.

To ensure accessibility for all entrepreneurs, DCEO's EECs offer flexible meeting formats: in-person, virtual, or over the phone, and personalized 1:1 advising based on business needs. Dislocated workers benefit from re-training and business planning support that helps them transition into entrepreneurship. Veterans are served through specialized cohorts and workshops, such as Southern Illinois University's "Boots to Business: Reboot" and Southland Development Authority's "Veteran Entrepreneurship Capacity Cohort" program that provide tailored training, mentorship, and access to veteran-specific funding. Youth-focused programming is also growing thanks to Southland Development Authority, with foundational business education and mentorship opportunities designed to support young early-stage entrepreneurs.

Cross Sector Collaboration

The EECs have collaborated with a wide range of small and new business assistance programs and partner organizations across Illinois. These collaborations span programmatic partnerships, referral networks, co-hosted events, and integrated service delivery models. To date, 992 businesses have been referred to external financial resources, business education programs, and other business incubators.

The Southern Illinois University (SIU) EEC, located in Carbondale, collaborated with the SIU Office of Innovation and Economic Development (OIED) to support regional entrepreneurship and economic development, aligning with the DCEO's mission. They leveraged university resources and partnerships, including SIU Veterans Services and the Veterans Business Outreach Center (VBOC), to support veteran entrepreneurs through 1:1 advising and hosting veteran-focused events. Similarly, the Southland Development Authority EEC, located in Tinley Park, partnered with Cook County Small Business Source to provide 1:1 business advising to EEC cohort participants, covering marketing, financial planning, and access to capital.

992
Businesses Referred to Key Growth Resources
 External Funding | Business Education | Incubator Programs

In Chicago, the Sunshine Enterprises EEC partnered with local organizations to deliver industry-specific cohorts and support services. Center for Changing Lives (CCL) collaborated with local organizations and City of Chicago government to deliver bilingual workshops, pop-up markets, and financial literacy programming. The Foundation of Little Village EEC collaborated with the Women's Business Development Center (WBDC) and others to deliver financial literacy and business advising cohorts. Additionally, Vermillion Advantage partnered with Old National Bank to deliver the "Money Smart for Small Business" training.

These coordinated efforts ensure that entrepreneurs receive comprehensive, culturally relevant, and continuous support throughout their business development journey.

Funding Leveraged

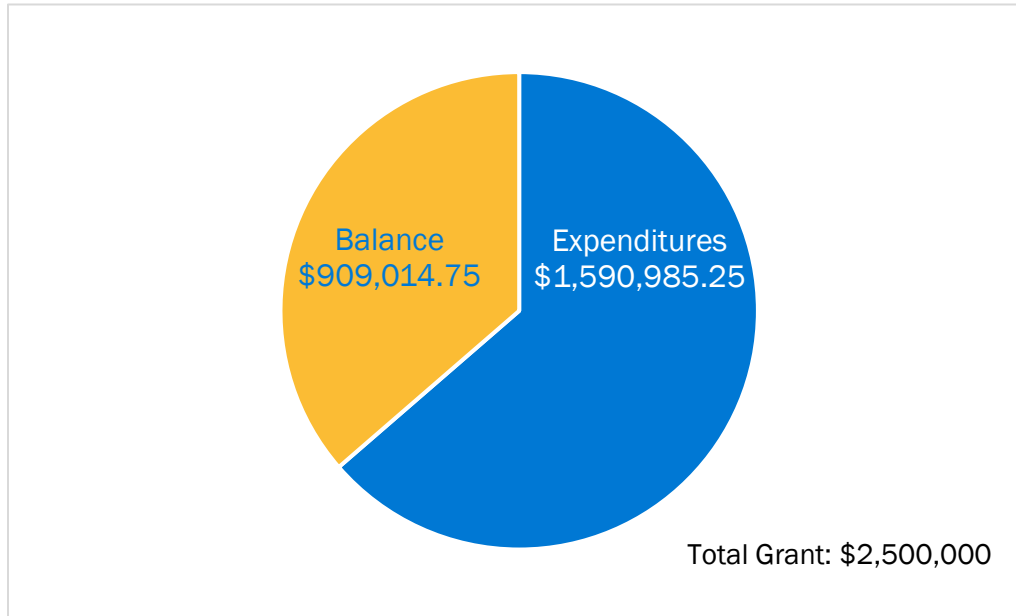
The participating agencies have been able to leverage diverse sources of funding and support to expand the program's reach, enhance service delivery, and sustain long-term impact. This financial strength has enabled Sunshine Enterprises to support their EEC and expand its services significantly.

Other organizations within the EEC network have also effectively leveraged funding. Rogers Park Business Alliance expanded its Business Accessibility Toolkit and launched the bilingual GROW-MORE/PROGRESANDO-MÁS program, an advanced bilingual entrepreneurial training program. The Foundation of Little Village secured funding for credit and capital access training and customer relationship management systems to enhance referral tracking. Southland Development Authority used funds to increase advising hours, hire facilitators, develop curriculum, and conduct outreach to underserved populations. Center for Changing Lives leveraged funding to deliver specialized cohort programs (e.g., AI Essentials, Funding Fundamentals), provide 1:1 business coaching, and launch a free online learning platform. Collectively, these efforts illustrate the program's strong capacity to attract, manage, and strategically deploy funding from multiple sources to meet the evolving needs of small and new businesses, especially those in historically underserved communities.

2026 Goals

- Strengthen infrastructure through metrics enhancement to allow more robust data tracking
- Have regular check-ins with participating agencies to foster stronger relationships
- Encourage collaboration among the EECs to share best practices, innovative solutions, and a more unified approach to service delivery
- Launch EEC Round 2 NOFO for an additional \$2.5 million, open to existing EECs and organizations located in regions currently without an EEC presence

Program Spend Down (June 1, 2024 – December 1, 2025)



Grantee	Total Grant	Expenditures to Date	Balance as of 12/1/25
Black Business Alliance Peoria	\$250,000.00	\$107,237.51	\$142,762.49
Board of Trustees of Southern Illinois University Carbondale	\$250,000.00	\$142,069.62	\$107,930.38
Center for Changing Lives	\$250,000.00	\$140,799.80	\$109,200.20
Chicago's Sunshine Enterprises	\$250,000.00	\$165,717.69	\$84,282.31
Rogers Park Business Alliance	\$250,000.00	\$171,767.60	\$78,232.40
Goodwill Industries of Northern Illinois and Wisconsin Stateline Area, Inc.	\$250,000.00	\$167,609.48	\$82,390.52
Little Village Community Foundation Corp.	\$250,000.00	\$108,450.37	\$141,549.63
Quad County Urban League	\$250,000.00	\$222,515.78	\$27,484.22
Southland Development Authority	\$250,000.00	\$207,744.92	\$42,255.08
Vermilion Advantage NFP	\$250,000.00	\$157,072.48	\$92,927.52
Total	\$2,500,000.00	\$1,590,985.25	\$909,014.75