

Governor Pritzker Launches \$2.5 Million Economic Empowerment Centers Program

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CHICAGO – Today, Governor JB Pritzker and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) launched \$2.5 million in funding for the new Illinois Economic Empowerment Centers Program (EEC). Eligible career education agencies and non-profit organizations can now apply to serve as EECs to provide entrepreneurship training to prepare individuals from historically marginalized communities to pursue business opportunities in a more inclusive business ecosystem. EECs will be selected through a competitive Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) process.

“Illinois is stronger when every individual has equitable opportunities to thrive,” said Governor JB Pritzker. “That’s why I’m proud to launch \$2.5 million in funding to uplift communities that have historically lacked access to business resources and guidance while facing significant barriers to entry. Our new Illinois Economic Centers Program will provide a comprehensive business support system that will ensure every business—from start-ups to established entities—have pathways to success.”

The EEC Grant Program was created to address the need for tailored support at a local, community and cultural level for Illinoisans in targeted populations in the business community, including minorities, women, individuals with a disability, dislocated workers, veterans, and youth entrepreneurs. Through the new grant program, EECs will aim to create an inclusive business ecosystem for communities that have traditionally faced systemic barriers to entry and growth through dynamic partnerships, targeted outreach, and tailored programs and initiatives.

“Centering equity in economic development benefits all Illinoisans, and the Economic Empowerment Centers Program uplifts economically disenfranchised communities. This program provides the training and services that break down the barriers of inequality,” said Lt. Gov. Juliana Stratton. “This investment is a testament to ensure entrepreneurship is a reality for people across Illinois.”

EECs will provide business advice, technical assistance, education, and cohort training, including resources and training tailored toward start-ups, existing businesses, and dislocated workers. Selected EECs will provide a variety of services, including management analysis and counseling, business planning and financial planning assistance, market analysis, referrals to educational programs and more.

“Communities that have historically faced systemic barriers will soon have a breadth of new opportunities provided by the new Illinois Economic Empowerment Centers,” said DCEO Director Kristin Richards. “Through the EEC program, DCEO is investing in Illinois’ diverse entrepreneurs and ensuring they have access to resources and training that will help them thrive in the workplace.”

Eligible applicants include career-education agencies and non-profit organizations, including but not limited to local developments corporations, chambers of commerce, community-based outreach centers, community-based organizations that provide services to minority-owned businesses and entrepreneurs.

“The State of Illinois’ investments in the new Economic Empowerment Centers Program will have a profound effect on the career trajectories of Illinoisans from historically marginalized communities,” said Sen. Elgie Sims, Jr. (D-Chicago). “The

EECs will do more than provide generic entrepreneurship training – they will have the capacity and ability to provide tailored support and resources to communities that need it the most.”

Qualified entities can apply for grants between \$250,000 to \$500,000, with a 1:1 match required. DCEO anticipates selecting up to 10 awards. Applications will be accepted until November 28, 2023, at 5:00 p.m. To view the NOFO and apply for the grant, please visit the [DCEO website](#). Interested parties are encouraged to reach out to CEO. GrantHelp@illinois.gov for application assistance.

“Illinois continues to pave the way by providing hands-on support to Illinois’ entrepreneurs of tomorrow who have historically faced barriers to entry,” said Rep. Marcus C. Evans, Jr. (D-Chicago). “The State’s EEC Program will allow individuals to receive hands-on support, training, and education that will open the doors to a number of business opportunities across Illinois.”

To help applicants prepare to apply for funding, DCEO will be holding a [webinar](#) from 11 a.m. – 12 p.m. on Tuesday, October 17.