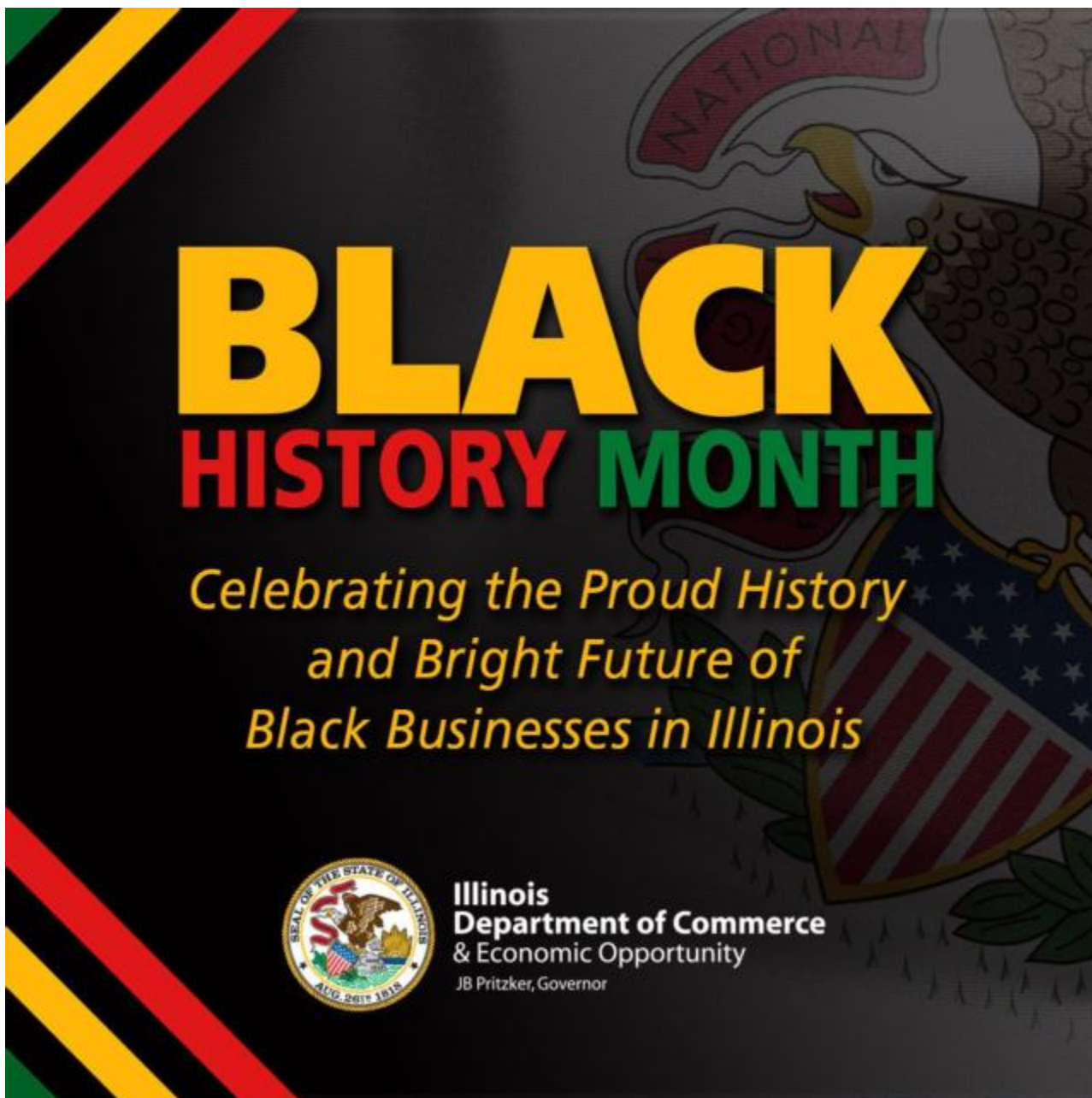


State Of Illinois Kicks Off Black History Month

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CHICAGO –The State of Illinois today announced a series of events and resources planned during February’s National Black History Month to recognize the important contributions of Black businesses in Illinois’ economy, and to promote efforts aimed at supporting their continued growth in the years ahead. Planned by the Illinois Department of Commerce (DCEO) Office of Minority Economic Empowerment (OMEE), the Department of Central Management Services (CMS), and community and civic leaders including the Chicago Urban League, Fifth Third Bank, and more – the events planned will include a wide range of topics offering insight into resources and programs exclusively focused on boosting Black and minority-owned businesses in Illinois.

This year’s Black History Month pays tribute to the 132,000 Black businesses in Illinois, building on the work that the State does year-round to recognize their contributions and provide targeted programs and resources to lift up diverse businesses and ensure equitable opportunity for businesses of all types and sizes.

"National Black History Month is an opportunity for all of us to seek a deeper understanding of Black history and experiences, laying the groundwork for more progress toward equity and freedom the rest of the year," said Governor JB Pritzker. "Since day one of my administration, I've directed all of state government to operate with those values in mind, and I'm proud of the steps the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and the Department of Central Management Services have taken to support our minority-owned businesses around the state. From launching the nation's largest small business COVID-19 grant program to guiding less-resourced businesses through federal aid programs, this month's Black business outreach events build on our efforts to bring economic opportunity to every zip code of Illinois."

Throughout the month, DCEO will be partnering with state leaders in promoting a wide range of events focused on topics including: COVID-19 relief, access to capital, branding, grant applications, and a special panel focused on diversifying international trade. A number of DCEO and State of Illinois programs will be highlighted – as well as financial assistance by public and private partners.

“Throughout Illinois and across the country, Black businesses are essential to the vitality and strength of our communities and the economy,” said Erin Guthrie, Director of DCEO. “As we celebrate 2021’s Black History Month, our administration is committed to lifting up all of our Black-owned businesses now more than ever before given the profound impact COVID-19 has had on these communities. We invite you to join us for a series of events as we explore opportunities that will allow them to grow and thrive.”

The Illinois Department of Central Management Service's (CMS) Business Enterprise Program (BEP) will participate in several events and offer training and technical

assistance to business owners to assist them with certification options. BEP certification ensures Black and other minority-owned businesses in every community have the access and opportunity to participate in the economic future of Illinois.

“Supporting Black businesses and entrepreneurs is a critical component of restoring Illinois,” said CMS Director Janel L. Forde. “Through programs like BEP, CMS is working to ensure historically disadvantaged businesses have access to opportunities to grow their businesses, especially as so many have been impacted by COVID-19.”

Upcoming events being hosted by DCEO, CMS, and its partners include the following – registration is now open and can be found on the [DCEO website](#).

Wednesday, February 11, 2021, 10:00 A.M., [Celebrating the History of Black Business: A Fireside Chat with Director Erin Guthrie](#)

DCEO will convene a discussion with 8 accomplished small business owners from across the state to share their experiences during the pandemic, including barriers overcome and lessons learned to help more Black businesses thrive during the pandemic and beyond.

Thursday, February 11, 1:00 P.M., [Fair Access to Justice | Diversity in Procurement \(Part I\)](#)

CMS and DCEO will present a special two-part Fair Access to Justice Series, exploring diversity-related matters in procurement. This first series will offer attendees information on the certification process for the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) and guide small business owners to resources and other important information relative to doing business with the state of Illinois.

Thursday, February 18, 2021, 2:00 P.M., [Black Access to Capital: How Black Economic Trailblazers are Closing the “Racial Wealth Gap”](#)

DCEO Director Guthrie will join Fifth Third Bank, the Chicago Urban League, 4S Bay Partners, and Black Chicago Pioneers for a panel discussion about ways to increase access to capital in Black communities, and solutions for addressing the equity gaps faced today.

Tuesday, February 23, 2021, 2:00 P.M., [Black History Month: Opportunities in Trade and Overcoming Barriers](#)

DCEO’s Office of Minority Economic Empowerment (OMEE) and the International Trade Club of Chicago (ITCC) host a conversation about how to increase Black business participation in international trade, including through tools like the State’s I-STEP program, aimed at introducing more small and minority companies to the \$62 billion dollar a year export market. Registration code: ITCCOMEE

Wednesday, February 24, 2021, 10:00 A.M., [Advancing the Development of Minority Entrepreneurship \(ADME\): Longevity in Business](#)

DCEO's Office of Minority Economic Empowerment (OMEE) and the Illinois Small Business Development Center (SBDC) will host a conversation on "Longevity in Business." A panel of Black business owners from across the state will share insights and best practices for starting, growing, and maintaining a successful business for years to come.

Thursday, February 25, 2021, 1:00P.M. [Fair Access to Justice | Diversity in Procurement \(Part II\)](#)

CMS and DCEO will present a special two-part Fair Access to Justice Series, exploring diversity-related matters in procurement. This is the second conversation in the two-part series and will focus on how the State can continue to advance economic development in Black communities around Illinois by working alongside of community organizations dedicated to this advancement as well.

With small businesses facing unprecedented challenges due to COVID-19, the state has directed significant investments to expand outreach and resources, placing a premium on equity and access for small and minority owned businesses. This includes the equity-centric Business Interruption Grants (BIG) program, created by Governor Pritzker and the Illinois General Assembly to direct emergency relief for small business owners amid the COVID-19 crisis. The program, the largest of its kind in the nation, provided a record number of minority grants, with nearly \$90 million devoted to these businesses, and \$18 million for Black business owners.

"The BIG grant helped us through one of the toughest periods our business has ever faced," said Mr. and Mrs. Purfoy, owners of 15th and Chris Restaurant in Rockford. "The pandemic hit us hard, both personally and from a business perspective, but the funds from the grant allowed us to steady the ship from slowed business and make adjustments to prepare for what's coming ahead."

To help Black and minority-owned businesses address the sustained impacts of COVID-19, the State has also bolstered investments in outreach to help more Illinois businesses qualify for the recently extended PPP. These new investments focus on hard-hit small and minority-owned businesses – which have traditionally faced barriers to accessing federal funding opportunities. To help more businesses unlock funding on PPP this time around as well as the forthcoming EIDL advance and Shuttered Venue Operator Grants programs, DCEO is leveraging support by community navigator partners, piloted under BIG. These partners include: the Illinois Business Immigration Coalition, The Resurrection Project, the Greater Auburn Gresham Development Corporation, and the Chicago Urban League.

“It is exciting to work with the State of Illinois to highlight the plight of and offer concrete solutions to Black businesses,” said Karen Freeman-Wilson, President and CEO of the Chicago Urban League. “Like all of us, Governor Pritzker and Lt. Governor Stratton understand the urgency of this work 365 days a year and have delivered equity-centric programs that are meeting the needs of the moment for our small, minority businesses.”

The Illinois Office of Minority Economic Empowerment (OMEE) plays a crucial role in providing support to minority-owned businesses of all sizes and types, including connection with grants, technical assistance, and incentives to bolster minority entrepreneurs and minority-owned enterprises. For more information on Illinois Black History Month [events planned](#) for businesses, please contact Matthew J. Simpson, the African American Business Development Manager, at Matthew.Simpson@illinois.gov.

To learn more about ongoing resources and programs for businesses, follow DCEO on social media @IllinoisDCEO or [sign up](#) to receive the newsletter.

For updates on Black History events and future programming from BEP, follow CMS on [LinkedIn](#) or visit the [BEP Events calendar](#).