

Pritzker Announces Notice Of Funding Opportunity To Assist Small Businesses With COVID-19 Emergency Relief

May 11 2021 1:50 PM

SPRINGFIELD — Governor JB Pritzker and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) today announced a significant expansion of DCEO’s community navigator program, an outreach model leveraging community partners to help small, minority owned businesses connect with emergency resources during the pandemic. Based on the success of the community navigator program launched by the State last fall, which helped tens of thousands of small businesses with applying for emergency grants, DCEO is issuing a notice of funding opportunity (NOFO) making up to \$10 million in additional grant funding available for community partners who can assist the State in reaching more small businesses.

With many small businesses still struggling from the impact of COVID-19, the expansion of community navigator services will play an important role in helping more disadvantaged businesses benefit from ongoing federal relief efforts and future business relief programs to aid in the economic recovery.

“Illinois has been a leader on delivering emergency relief for small businesses throughout the pandemic –providing more than 9,000 grants through the nation’s largest state-run economic support program, and spearheading a first of its kind outreach model to ensure that dollars reach businesses in the hardest hit communities,” **said Gov. JB Pritzker.** “While much progress has been made in curbing the pandemic, we know that much more help is needed for our small businesses to recover – particularly for businesses in rural, minority and low-income areas who too often are locked out of funding. Our investments to expand the Community Navigator network will make sure that more Illinois businesses and communities can tap into crucial federal funding that will help our resilient small businesses get the relief they need while reigniting our local economies.”

Leveraging community organizations through a hub and spoke model, the navigator model has assisted the State with providing comprehensive outreach and services focused on small businesses facing barriers to accessing emergency pandemic relief. Through the NOFO, DCEO will expand the program by issuing approximately 15 additional grants to expand the program and to reach small businesses in every part of the state through partner organizations.

“Under Governor Pritzker’s leadership, Illinois has led with an equity centered approach to providing small business relief – and the community navigator program has been essential for reaching the hardest hit businesses across our state,” **said DCEO Acting Director Sylvia Garcia.** “By continuing to partner with trusted and experienced community organizations, we’re working to remove barriers facing businesses owned by people of color and those in low-income areas so that they can access crucial relief funds that will help them reopen, return staff to work, and start to rebuild again.”

Navigator partners provide businesses with direct assistance on applications for funding, as well as language assistance, on-the-ground outreach, webinars, technical assistance sessions, and more. This tailored approach includes assistance for minority owned, very small businesses, and those located in rural communities – businesses which may be at a disadvantage in competing for grant programs alongside larger and more well-resourced businesses.

Community navigators will provide specialized outreach to target businesses which typically face barriers in accessing capital and funding opportunities. This includes small businesses located in rural areas or disproportionately impacted areas (DIAs) designated by DCEO and small businesses owned by members of the following communities: racial or ethnic minorities, veterans, immigrants, women, and individuals with disabilities.

Using a hub-and-spoke model, DCEO will accept applications from regional partners (“hubs”) who demonstrate a plan to partner with subgrantees that are community-based organizations (“spokes”) located in low- and moderate-income (LMI) census tracts with a strong track record of serving diverse, underserved and minority-owned small businesses. DCEO will accept applications from a wide range of organization types, including but not limited to: chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, community organizations, business incubators, and more, with a goal of helping grant recipients ramp up outreach to begin this summer.

Since last year, the Pritzker Administration has invested over \$3 million to expand community navigator outreach programs and technical assistance services provided by DCEO and its partner agencies including DCEO’s statewide network of 42 Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs). During the state’s Business Interruption

Grants (BIG) program, DCEO's 12 community navigators reached nearly 30,000 small businesses, contributing to an equitable distribution of funds statewide, with over \$88 million or 3,600 total grants awarded to minority owned businesses. Through continued outreach and assistance focused on the federal Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) navigators have reached over 7,000 additional small businesses.

With several new and ongoing programs offered by the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), DCEO's community navigators remain underway now to support businesses applying for grants through the Shuttered Venue Operator Grant (SVOG), Restaurant Revitalization Fund (RRF), and more. Illinois' community navigator model has been recognized by the Biden-Harris administration, which is using this approach nationally through the recently passed American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). The federal community navigator program is expected to launch in the coming weeks, providing additional capacity for small businesses in need of emergency relief.

To apply for the community navigator NOFO, please visit [DCEO's website](#). Applications are due June 9, 2021. DCEO will host webinars on Thursday May 13th and 14th to assist interested parties with navigating the application process. To register for these webinars and to find more information on programs available for businesses and communities, please visit [DCEO's website](#) or follow us on social **@IllinoisDCEO**.