

Pritzker Administration Announces \$9 Million Investment in Community Navigator Program to Accelerate Small Business Economic Recovery

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CHICAGO – Governor JB Pritzker today joined the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) in announcing a \$9 million investment to expand the community navigator outreach program to help small businesses take advantage of

economic recovery grant programs. An expansion to the existing community navigator program leverages 13 community navigator organizations that will provide support for small businesses statewide who require assistance navigating billions of financial assistance dollars available from the State of Illinois and the U.S. Small Business Administration as a result of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

This latest investment by the State in additional community partners comes as Illinois prepares to launch the \$300 million Back 2 Business (B2B) small business recovery program later this month.

“Thanks to support from the federal government, I’m pleased to announce the State is once again providing a significant amount of economic recovery grants designed to help businesses with reopening, to bring employees back to work, and to help rebuild our economy post-pandemic,” said Governor JB Pritzker. “To ensure those dollars reach into the communities hit hardest by the pandemic, we’re directing investments to 13 trusted community partners who will work across their networks help ensure that businesses regardless of size, type, or location receive the support needed to build back from the pandemic. With this funding we are doubling down on an equity driven approach that will ensure hard hit businesses in minority and downstate communities are represented in these economic recovery programs.”

Community navigators will perform intensive outreach to ensure that small and hard-to-reach businesses are aware of economic relief funds available. Additionally, navigators will provide 1-on-1 technical assistance to support businesses in understanding how to access relief. The community navigator approach has also been recognized by the Biden-Harris administration as a proven method for ensuring funding is made accessible to minority and hard to reach communities.

"It is a priority of the Biden-Harris Administration to help all small businesses build back better, and this state program will bridge the gap between entrepreneurs locally and the SBA's vast array of resources and programs. We are thrilled that state leaders like Governor Pritzker are leading the charge at the local level," said SBA Administrator Isabella Casillas Guzman. "This Community Navigator Program will help state, local and federal agencies connect with small businesses that have historically been left behind. The smallest of the small—in rural and urban America—and small businesses owned by women and people of color have suffered the greatest economic loss from the pandemic. At the SBA, we're focused on reaching these underserved businesses to ensure they have the support they need to recover and build back better."

Using a hub-and-spoke model, DCEO trained 13 new regional partners to facilitate technical assistance for small businesses on a grassroots level. These 13 organizations, which were selected through a competitive process, have demonstrated plans to work as

hubs in parallel with over 100 community-based organizations, or “spokes,” based in low-to-moderate-income (LMI) census tracts. These organizations have a proven track record of serving diverse businesses across the state and will cover the following areas:

- **American Business Immigration Coalition** (*Serving Sangamon, Macon, McLean, Cook, Winnebago, Jackson*)
- **Champaign County Economic Development Corporation** (*Serving Macon, SBDC - Shelby; Champaign, Piatt, Douglas, Vermilion, SBDC - Ford, Iroquois; SBDC - DeWitt; SBDC - Moultrie, Coles, Edgar, Cumberland, Effingham*)
- **Cook County** (*Serving Chicago, South and West Sides of Cook County*)
- **Economic Development Council for the Peoria Area** (*Serving Logan, Peoria, Tazewell, Woodford, Mason, Fulton*)
- **Effingham Regional Growth Alliance** (*Serving Coles, Crawford, Effingham, Clark, Edgar, Moultrie*)
- **Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation** (*Serving Chicago Southside, South Suburbs, Eastern Will county, and all of Kankakee county; Chicago's Washington Heights Neighborhood, from Auburn-Gresham south to the boundary with the South Suburbs*)
- **Greater Egypt Regional Planning and Development Commission** (*Serving Wabash, Edwards, Wayne, Jefferson, Perry, Jackson, Union, Alexander, Pulaski, Massac, Pope, Hardin, Gallatin, White, Hamilton, Franklin, Williamson, Johnson, and Saline; Calhoun, Jersey, Madison, Saint Claire, Monroe, Randolph, Washington, Clinton, Bond*)
- **Illinois Public Health Association** (*Serving Springfield, Jacksonville, Beardstown, Cook, Will McHenry, Fairfield, Cobden, East St. Louis, Boone, Winnebago, Rock Island, Mercer, Henry, Jo Daviess, Carroll, Whiteside, Lee, Stephenson, and Ogle*)
- **Local Initiatives Support Corporation** (*Serving Sangamon, Shelby, McLean, Peoria, Cook, Coles, Douglas, Moultrie, Cumberland, Edgar, Clark*)
- **Mexican American Chamber of Commerce** (*Serving EDR 4 Waukegan, North Chicago, Joliet, Aurora, Romeoville, Melrose Park, Franklin Park, Maywood, Bellwood, Northfield, Stone Park, Humboldt Park, West Town, Logan Square, Belmont-Cragin, Wicker Park, Bucktown, Little Village, Midway, Back of the Yards, Pilsen, Westlawn*)
- **National Main Street Center Inc** (*Serving Jacksonville, Monticello, Pontiac, Crystal Lake, Batavia, Libertyville, 7 Commercial Districts in Chicago, Momence, Waukegan, Dixon, Silvis, Carbondale, Alton, Quincy*)
- **Western Illinois University, Board of Trustees** (*Serving Knox, Warren, Henderson, Hancock, McDonough, Schuyler, Brown, Pike, Adams*)
- **Women's Business Development Center** (*Serving DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Will; Particularly the Greater Aurora Region*)

“Unfortunately, we know that businesses in minority, rural and economically challenged locations have been hit hardest during the pandemic – with many facing additional barriers to submitting for relief programs,” said **DCEO Acting Director Sylvia Garcia**. “Under Governor Pritzker’s leadership, we are continuing to prioritize an equity-first response to the pandemic, leveraging community navigators to support small businesses in accessing the B2B program and other crucial recovery programs made available to help small businesses and the communities they reside in move forward with a successful reopening and recovery in the wake of the pandemic.”

Working with the community navigators, DCEO will conduct outreach locally on the forthcoming B2B grant program. The B2B program will prioritize hard hit industries and communities, providing grant funding to help businesses most impacted by COVID-19 recover operational losses.

“Many Latinx small businesses and other businesses of color have been left out of the recovery despite their significant contributions to our economy. Many of our businesses are often unaware of the resources available to them,” said Jaime di Paulo, President and CEO of the Illinois Hispanic Chamber of Commerce/Mexican American Chamber of Commerce. “That’s why we are proud to partner with the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity as a community navigator to ensure the businesses that need it most have access to resources and support that meet them where they are, so they can rebuild and thrive in the months and years to come.”

“We have great economic development partners in west central Illinois who are committed to helping businesses thrive,” said Chris Merrett, Director of The Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs (IIRA) at Western Illinois. “Thanks to funding from the State of Illinois, we’ll be able to expand our capacity to reach out to small business across a nine-county region to accelerate business recovery and growth.”

“The Effingham Regional Growth Alliance is excited to participate in the 2021 Small Business Community Navigator Program,” said Courtney Yockey, President and CEO, Effingham Regional Growth Alliance. “As a community navigator hub, we will work with our regional partners to ensure that businesses in south central and southeastern Illinois are competitive in applying for state and federal financial assistance programs and other necessary resources needed to recover from the pandemic-induced recession.”

“Greater Auburn Gresham Development Corporation is pleased to be a lead organization for DCEO's community navigators program providing outreach and technical assistance to businesses,” said Carlos Nelson, CEO of the Greater Auburn

Gresham Development Corporation. “Bringing support to businesses on Chicago's far south side and southland communities is essential to making Chicagoland a place where all people, regardless of race or location, can thrive and build wealth.”

To ensure the smallest and most vulnerable businesses are prioritized, navigator partners will provide small businesses with direct assistance on applications, as well as language assistance, on-the-ground outreach, webinars, technical assistance sessions, and more. Navigator partners will also work with the department to support businesses eligible for ongoing SBA programs, including the Shuttered Venue Operator Grants (SVOG), EIDL, and more.

An expansion of the community navigator program builds on the success of this approach first piloted during the state’s Business Interruption Grants (BIG) program – which led to a record amount of funding deployed, including over 40 percent of grants to minority-owned businesses. During the BIG program, more than 30,000 unique businesses statewide received outreach from a community navigator.

Since the onset of the pandemic, the Pritzker administration has led a swift response supporting communities and businesses hardest hit by COVID-19. Overall, more than \$1 billion in relief has been deployed – including over \$200 million provided through the Local CURE program, over \$325 million provided through the Emergency Rental Assistance program and nearly \$580 million provided to small businesses and childcare providers in every corner of the state through the historic BIG program.

For more information on recovery programs and how to receive support, businesses are encouraged to visit the [DCEO webpage](#) or call the First Stop hotline at 1.800.252.2923.