Illinois
Department of Commerce
& Economic Opportunity
JB Pritzker, Governor

Illinois Economic Empowerment Centers (EEC)
NOFO FAQ*

EEC Grant Eligibility

Q: Who can apply for an EEC Grant?
A: Career education agencies and nonprofit organizations, including but not limited to local development corporations, chambers of commerce, community-based outreach centers, and community-based organizations that provide services to the Targeted Program Participants. **For-profit entities, such as small businesses, are not eligible to apply for the EEC NOFO.**

Q: What is a career education agency?
A: Career education agencies also known as career development agencies are organizations/institutions that focus on providing services and support related to career education and development.

Q: What is a Community-Based Outreach Center/Organization?
A: A Community-Based Organization is a non-profit entity that operates within a specific community or geographical area, aiming to address local needs and improve the well-being of its residents.

Q: Is a State University considered a career education agency?
A: Yes, State Community Colleges and Universities are considered career education agencies.

Q: Can a for-profit educational institution apply?
A: No, for-profit educational institutions are not eligible to apply. The institution may work in partnership with a not-for-profit organization; however, the non-profit organization must be the organization who applies for this program.

Q: Can multiple organizations apply as a collaborative group of nonprofits?
A: Multiple organizations may partner, but only one entity may be the primary applicant.

Q: Must an organization work with various industries to serve as an EEC?
A: Yes, organizations should be equipped to provide business technical assistance to various industries.

Q: Can an organization have more than one project location?
A: Yes, more than one location can be included in the proposal, however, the location(s) must already be established.

Q: If an organization is not located in a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) investment area but serves and works with clients in the targeted areas, is that organization eligible to apply?

A: Yes, the organization is eligible to apply. However, DCEO will prioritize EEC projects located in CDFI investment areas.

Q: What is a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) Investment Area?
A: The population in CDFI Investment Areas serves as a proxy for the needs of SEDI-owned businesses because these areas are generally low-income, high-poverty geographies that receive neither sufficient access to capital nor support for the needs of small businesses, including minority-owned businesses. A CDFI must have a primary mission of promoting community development. The CDFI Fund will consider whether the activities of the entity are purposefully directed toward improving the social and/or economic conditions of underserved people (which may include Low-Income persons or persons who lack adequate access to capital and/or Financial Services) and/or residents of economically distressed communities (which may include Investment Areas).

Q: If an organization already has an established group or committee, can that same group be utilized as the advisory group of the EEC?
A: Per the statute, the advisory group must be comprised of community business experts, at least one-half of whom shall be representative of the clientele (Target Program Participants) to be served by the center, which shall constitute a support network to provide counseling and mentoring services to minority group members, women, youth entrepreneurs, individuals with a disability, dislocated workers, and veterans.

Q: What are the differences between the Economic Empowerment Centers (EEC) program and the Small Business Development Centers (SBDC) program?
A: The EEC program was established through Public Act 102-0821 and is funded solely through State funds. This program prioritizes centers that are located in Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) investment areas.

While the program services are open to business owners across Illinois, the primary Target Program Participants are Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Individuals (SEDI), Very Small Businesses (VSBs), Minority Groups, Women, Entrepreneurs with Disabilities, Veterans, Dislocated Workers, and Youth Entrepreneurs. This program uses a two-pronged approach: cohort based training and one-on-one technical assistance. The cohort training plan must incorporate cultural awareness by integrating the diverse beliefs and values of the target populations. Programming must also align with standardized diversity, equity, and inclusion principles and include appropriate language access.

Q: Who were the Round One grant recipients?
A: The EEC Round One recipients can be found on the Illinois Economic Empowerment Centers website.

Applying for The EEC Grant

Q: How do I apply for an EEC Grant?
A: Apply here or contact us via email at CEO.EECProgram@illinois.gov for application materials.

Q: What do I need to include in my application package?
A: The list of required documents can be found on page 7 and 8 of the NOFO supplement in the *Content and Form of Application Submission* section.

***NOTE: All required documents will need to be submitted with your application, otherwise your application will not be considered. Please be sure to follow the naming conventions outlined in the NOFO and Program Application.**

Q: Should the Uniform Budget reflect 1 or both years of the grant term?
A: The Uniform Budget submitted should be reflective of the anticipated 2-year grant period.

Q: How do you decide who will be awarded EEC Grant dollars?
A: Eligible applications will be reviewed on a competitive basis and graded on a 100-point scale based on need, capacity, and quality. The final score of each Committee member will be calculated and the average of all scores will be the applicant's final score.

OE3 may consider geographic coverage alongside grantee scores when making funding recommendations and may prioritize EEC projects located in CDFI investment areas.

EEC Program Beneficiaries

Q: What constitutes a Very Small Business (VSB)?
A: A Very Small Business is defined as a business with fewer than 10 employees and may include independent contractors and sole proprietors.

Q: What constitutes a Socially Economically Disadvantaged Individual (SEDI) Business?
A: If privately owned, 51% is owned by one or more socially and economically disadvantaged individuals. If publicly owned, 51% of the stock is owned by one or more socially and economically disadvantaged individuals.

Q: Who is considered a socially and economically disadvantaged individual?
A: Socially disadvantaged individuals are those who have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice or cultural bias because of their identity as a member of a group without regard to their individual qualities.

Economically disadvantaged individuals are those socially disadvantaged individuals whose ability to compete in the free enterprise system has been impaired due to diminished capital and credit opportunities as compared to others in the same business area who are not socially disadvantaged.

Q: Are there Targeted Program Participants to be served by the EEC?
A: Yes, selected applicants must have the capacity to provide services to Socially Economically Disadvantaged Individuals (SEDI)-owned businesses, Very Small Businesses (VSBs), or entrepreneurs from one or more members of the following groups: minority group members, women, individuals with a disability, dislocated workers, veterans, and youth entrepreneurs (collectively referred to as the "Target Program Participants").

Q: Can EECs provide technical assistance to nonprofits run by minorities/women/persons with disabilities?
A: No, this grant is intended to provide Target Program Participants with training in all aspects of business development and small business management.

Q: Can the EEC provide technical assistance to only dislocated workers? Can the program be tailored to provide training skills for jobs?
A: No, the Statute that established this program intended for this program to serve all of the Target Program Participants in the principles and practices of entrepreneurship.

Q: Are there limitations to the sizes of the groups/cohorts?
A: No, there are no specific limitations. DCEO welcomes the proposal and will communicate if there are any concerns.

Q: Can technical workshops that are laid out in a multi-week training session qualify as education for the EEC?
A: Yes, this would be considered “cohort training” which is a requirement for this grant.

EEC Grant Dollar Specifics

Q: How much money is available? How many Grants do you plan to award?
A: Total amount of funding expected to be awarded through this round of funding is $2,500,000, ranging from $250,000-$500,000 per awardee. No more than 10 awards will be issued under this NOFO. DCEO reserves the right to issue a reduced award, or to not issue any award.

Q: Is the award range of $250,000-$500,000 for 1 year or both years?
A: The grant amount awarded will be reflective of the 2-yr grant period.

Q: Does DCEO offer specific guidance or standardized instructions on how applicants should determine the amount of funding to request for their proposed programming?
A: No, DCEO expects that applicants will request the amount of funding that is reasonable and necessary (and within the approved range of $250,000 - $500,000) to support the programming they are proposing.

Q: What can EEC Grant dollars be used for?
A: EEC Grant dollars may only be used for cost of services and expenses for: Program Director, Instructors, Faculty, Support Personnel, and any other person(s) providing instruction and counseling in furtherance of the program.

Q: Can EEC Grant dollars be used for travel?
A: DCEO may consider travel dollars if they are directly used in furtherance of the program. DCEO reserves the right to reject travel costs.

Q: Are indirect costs allowed under this program?
A: No, indirect costs are not allowable expenses under this program.

Q: Is this a reimbursement grant?
A: Yes, this is a reimbursement-based grant. A working capital dollar amount equal to two (2) months of expenditures ***may*** be released upon execution of the uniform grant agreement; the remainder of grant funds will be issued based upon cash needs/reimbursement.

Q: Will there be any cost sharing or matching tied to the EEC Grant?
A: Yes, a minimum overall matching contribution of 100% of the grant amount is required. This includes a required minimum cash match of 50% of the grant amount. In-kind (non-cash) match of 50% of the grant amount may be provided to meet the full required matching contribution of 100%

of the grant amount. All sources of match must be identified and available to the applicant at the start of the grant term.

The applicant must provide letters of support for match funding and in-kind support with the application submission to verify commitments to meet cost-sharing requirements.

Q: Is there a specific time frame in which the match funding should be available?
A: The match funding should be available during the entirety of the grant period (24 months). Each time an agency submits a voucher for reimbursement, they must include documentation showing they have matching funds that equal the amount being requested.

Q: Do the matching funds need to be a new commitment or can it be existing funding that has been renewed?
A: The match does not need to be a new commitment; it can be existing funding that has been renewed.

Q: What is an in-kind match?
A: An in-kind match refers to a contribution that is made with goods, services, or assets rather than cash. It is a non-monetary contribution. In-kind matches can include things like volunteer labor, donated equipment, or providing the organization's office space free of charge. Please note that the in-kind match should be tied to the EEC services.

Q: Can funds from another DCEO (or another state agency) or local government grant count toward the grant match?
A: Yes, State and local funds can be counted toward the grant match as long as the other grant allows for it.

Q: Can the assets of an existing loan collateral fund count toward the match requirement?
A: Yes.

Q: Can a line of credit for an organization count towards the matching requirement?
A: No.

Q: Are applicants expected to develop sliding scale/fee-for-service models for their programs? Are free services allowed?
A: Applicants are encouraged to develop fee-for service models for their programs. The fees may vary based upon a Program Participant's ability to pay. Sliding scale fees are expected to be flexible and adaptable to meet the needs of a diverse clientele. However, free services are allowed.

Q: Is this funding tied to federal funding?
A: No, these are solely State funds.

Q: Is there a public rubric for this grant?
A: Yes, the criteria can be found on page 9 and 10 of the NOFO Supplement under Section E. *Application Review Information*.

Q: Can we use these funds to purchase a location for expansion?
A: No, these funds are solely for programmatic use. Locations must be established prior to application.

EEC Grant Timeline

Q: What is the deadline to apply for the EEC Grant?

A: This opportunity will remain open on a rolling basis until all funds have been awarded. Please note that the anticipated period of performance is July 1, 2026, through June 30, 2028; however, the grant term may be adjusted based on actual award dates.

Q: When will I be notified if I was awarded an EEC Grant?

A: DCEO *anticipates* sending Notice of State Awards (NOSAs) 8-12 weeks after the application is submitted. DCEO reserves the right to issue a reduced award, or not to issue any award.

With Agency approval, pre-award costs are allowable under this opportunity dating back to the date of the NOSA.

Q: When will I be notified if I was denied for an EEC Grant?

A: Applications that do not advance to Merit Review will receive a denial notice within 1–3 business days. Applications that undergo Merit Review and are not recommended for funding will receive a denial notice within 8-12 weeks of submission.

EEC Grant Disbursement/Post-Disbursement

Q: What would be expected of me as an EEC Grant recipient?

A: For exact details on Grantee expectations, please refer to the online NOFO.

Q: If I am an EEC Grant recipient, when can I expect to receive my grant dollars?

A: A cash request for a working capital advance equal to two (2) months of expenditures ***may*** be processed upon execution of the uniform grant agreement.

Other

Q: Are organizations allowed to create a name for their centers?

A: Organizations may create unique names for their programs; however, the center itself must be identified as an Economic Empowerment Center.

Q: How can I apply for nonprofit status?

A: https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/application-process This designation is issued at a federal level, not at the State level. Contact the IRS for assistance with the application process.

Q: Does this opportunity allow an organization to apply through a fiscal sponsor?

A: No. applicants must have their own recognized not-for-profit status to be eligible for this program.

Q: Does the presence of an SBDC in my area impact the likelihood of my receiving EEC grant dollars?

A: No, it does not.

Q: Will the EEC NOFO be posted online in other languages?

A: No, it is only posted in English.

Q: Is there a geographical preference for the location of prospective EECs?

A: Our goal is to ensure that locations of EECs are distributed proportionately throughout the state. Prospective EECs must be in an area physically accessible to eligible clients for in-person trainings, consultations, etc. Certain regions may end up with a higher concentration of EECs simply based on population needs.

Q: Would rejection notices be sent at the same time as a Notice of State Award (NOSA)?
A: No, applications are reviewed in the order they are received and thus will be notified of their approval or denial upon determination.

Q: Are the SBDCs eligible to apply?
A: Yes, SBDCs are eligible to apply. However, SBDC funds may not be used to meet the EEC match requirement. In addition, SBDC and EEC participant counts and performance goals must remain separate and may not be combined; all program performance metrics must be reported independently.

Q: Where can we find other NOFOs/RFPs?
A: DCEO Grant Opportunities can be found on the DCEO Apply For Funding website.

Q: Does SBDC or BEP agency need to review and sign off on the application before submission?
A: No, this is not a requirement for this opportunity.

Q: Are there any best practices for sustainability beyond the 2-year grant period that are recommended?
A: We encourage applicants to provide their own proposal for sustainability beyond the 2-year grant period.

Q: Is there flexibility in opening the training to young entrepreneurs between the ages of 13-18?
A: No, the Statue that created this program considers youth entrepreneurs as individuals between the ages of 16 and 29 years old. Individuals under 16 would not be eligible to receive assistance.

Q: Can an organization charge a fee to reserve a training spot and keep the fee if the participant does not show?
A: DCEO does not have a policy specific to this scenario and will defer to the host organization's applicable policies.

Q: Is there a specific CRM that DCEO recommends for this project?
A: No. However, DCEO will expect the grantee to implement a tracking system that is mutually agreed upon by both parties within three (3) months of grant agreement execution,

Q: For sliding scale pricing of programs, do you recommend we all use the most current HUD guidelines?
A: Yes. However, organizations may propose their own sliding scale pricing structure using the methods they determine to be appropriate.

Q: Can we hire individuals as instructors if their academic credentials were earned outside the United States and have not been formally recognized or evaluated in the U.S.?
A: DCEO does not have a specific policy addressing this exact situation. In cases where instructor credentials were earned outside the United States, we rely on the host organization's policies and procedures for verifying qualifications. However, we do expect all instructors to be appropriately qualified to provide entrepreneurial assistance.

Q: Can this grant opportunity be used to support the launch of a new or pilot business assistance or training initiative?
A: Yes, organizations are welcome to design new business assistance or training initiatives, however, the organizations must be established and have previous experience providing entrepreneurial technical assistance.

***Note: This document will be updated as new questions are submitted.**