

Supporting Small and Emerging Businesses in Illinois

JULY 23, 2025

Introduction

Section 1-56 (b)(2) of the Illinois Power Agency Act requires the Illinois Power Agency (IPA) to "make every effort to ensure that small and emerging businesses (SEBs), particularly those located in low-income and environmental justice communities, are able to participate in the Illinois Solar for All Program" and to report on progress and barriers to participation of small and emerging businesses in Illinois Solar for All (ILSFA). The Small and Emerging Business team was launched in the fall of 2023 to help businesses overcome barriers to participation. This report provides an overview of strategies, efforts, and key outcomes toward fostering a solar industry inclusive of diverse small businesses from fall 2023 through spring 2025. The next report will be available in the spring-early summer of 2026.

Small And Emerging Business Team

The Small and Emerging Business team is led by the Program Administrator, Elevate, with oversight from the IPA. This effort is spearheaded by the ILSFA Associate Director and ILSFA Senior Associate at Elevate, and Elevate's subcontractor, CANDO Corporation. This team was formed in the fall of 2023. Recognizing the challenges that small and emerging businesses face, the team emphasizes equity, capacity-building, and individual and collective support as guiding principles in its engagement with businesses. The team aims to provide expertise and individualized and relevant support to small and emerging businesses using strategies described in this report.

Role Of Small And Emerging Businesses

Small businesses¹ play a crucial role in Illinois - they are a platform for entrepreneurship, they provide career opportunities, services, social and community benefits, and they strengthen local economies. Many SEBs play a crucial role in serving environmental justice (EJ) and income-eligible (IE) communities, helping to expand solar access to households and other entities in those areas. Several Small and Emerging Businesses have offices and/or other operations within EJ and IE communities.

Need For Small And Emerging Business Support

The Future Energy Jobs Act (FEJA) and the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) reinforced Illinois' commitment to solar and to provide access to customers. This has led to significant expansion of the solar industry in Illinois, which is comprised of local, in-state solar firms and out-of-state solar firms with a regional or national footprint. As the ILSFA program launched and the nascent solar market matured, only a few SEBs registered with ILSFA as Approved Vendors, and they faced challenges in developing viable project pipelines. Project applications and renewable energy incentives were, respectively, submitted by and awarded to a relatively small number of firms, few with headquarters in income-eligible and environmental justice areas. The Small and Emerging Business team conducted a needs assessment in the fall of 2023, holding 1:1 interviews to gather insights from Small and Emerging Business owners. For many SEBs, solar was a new and complex industry that presents several challenges, some of which have interdependencies:

LIMITED ACCESS TO CAPITAL

This is the most cited barrier amongst SEBs. Small and emerging solar companies often lack the financial resources to invest in equipment, staffing, and upfront project costs. Accessing traditional financing can be difficult, especially without a track record or strong credit history. Post-energization REC incentive payment can strain cash flow and limit the ability to take on new work.

ADMINISTRATIVE AND COMPLIANCE BURDENS

Incentive programs, permitting, and interconnection processes can be complex and time-consuming. Large firms typically have dedicated staff to manage compliance and

¹ The IPA uses the federal Small Business Administration definition of "small business" according to annual revenues within the appropriate NAICS category. Additionally, an "emerging business" is defined as a business that has been authorized to do business in any state for less than three years. See [Long Term Renewable Resources Procurement Plan](#), p.244.

paperwork, while smaller firms must divert limited capacity from core business operations. As a result, small companies may struggle to participate fully in programs.

LIMITED MARKET VISIBILITY AND ACCESS

Smaller firms often face barriers to customer acquisition due to limited marketing budgets and brand recognition. They may also lack access to networks, tools, or referral platforms.

CAPACITY CONSTRAINTS

Small solar firms often lack the in-house expertise required to manage all aspects of project development and completion. Unlike larger companies that have dedicated teams for system design, engineering, permitting, financing, and customer acquisition, small businesses may rely on a handful of staff who must juggle multiple roles. The aforementioned skills gap can create inefficiencies, delays, and difficulties in scaling operations. Additionally, smaller firms may need to collaborate with other companies that offer complementary expertise, such as specialized engineering firms, financing partners, or installation subcontractors.

LIMITED PROJECT DEVELOPMENT PIPELINE

Small and emerging businesses face challenges developing a solar project pipeline. Project scoping, customer acquisition, project finance, contracting, and project submittal are some of the necessary steps that are difficult for uninitiated businesses.

Small and Emerging Business Team Activities

The Small and Emerging Business team implemented a multi-faceted strategy to support small and emerging solar businesses seeking to enter or expand within the Illinois solar market. A crucial first step for a Small and Emerging Business is to identify a specific market segment where the business offers value to a well-defined group of customers with specific needs. Helping SEBs understand the diverse roles available in the solar market, the specific participation requirements of state solar programs, and creating awareness and connections to knowledge and financial resources have been key strategic drivers for the Small and Emerging Business team.

This Small and Emerging Business team's approach included convening key state programs, program administrators, and resource partners in settings intentionally designed to facilitate the exchange of information, foster communication, and promote

professional networking. Structured opportunities were provided for business owners to engage directly with individuals positioned to offer support, thereby establishing clear and actionable pathways to assistance. The team emphasized increasing the knowledge base of participating businesses through the delivery of one-on-one technical assistance, individualized guidance, and targeted referrals to relevant information and services.

A consistent theme identified through engagement with small businesses was that the lack of capital remains a persistent barrier to growth and participation in the solar market. Recognizing that solar project development timelines are often lengthy, complex, and capital-intensive, the team prioritized collaboration with agencies and programs equipped to help address this challenge. This included engagement with the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity to promote funding opportunities such as the Equitable Energy Future Grant, which provides financial support for eligible businesses. The Illinois Shines program was also highlighted as a key partner; it offers incentives for market-rate solar customers, and its Advance of Capital helps reduce the up-front financial burden for Equity Eligible Contractors. In addition, the team engaged the Illinois Finance Authority, which offers financing opportunities at reduced interest rates. Because access to capital is a fundamental requirement for business formation and growth, facilitating connections to financing resources remains a central focus of this Small and Emerging Business support strategy.

The Small and Emerging Business team developed a series of targeted events—webinars, workshops, and a major in-person conference. The team prioritized diversity in both the topics covered and geography to reach businesses in different regions and address a range of needs. Events were developed and hosted in partnership with key agencies and organizations,

including the Chicago Urban League, the NAACP Chicago Westside branch, the Illinois Shines program, the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO), the Peoria Minority Business Development Center, Hire360, the Illinois Finance Authority and Illinois Small Business Development Center. The team promoted the events through the ILSFA Approved Vendor and stakeholder email distribution lists, announcements on the ILSFA website, and through event partners' communication channels. In addition to events, the team created a new document – the Small and Emerging Business Guide – and helped with the development of the Illinois Power Agency's Small and Emerging Business Hub. The team also facilitated networking opportunities and provided one-on-one support to deliver personalized guidance, helping businesses navigate programs, access incentives, and build operational capacity.

Below is a summary of each of the Small and Emerging Business team events, including any event partners, event locations, speakers, and the topics covered, attendance, and some attendee feedback. Feedback helps inform topic areas for the Small and Emerging

team's future event programming and resource development. Some of the suggested topics from participant feedback include access to capital/funding/loans/grants, how to market solar, becoming an Approved Vendor and the different AV types, understanding renewable energy credits/solar incentives, community solar, bonding, Illinois Shines, bids and contracts, interconnection, sales and marketing, women in solar, and other topics.

Webinars And Educational Events

BUSINESS PLANS AND CAPABILITY STATEMENTS WEBINAR, JANUARY 16, 2024

This event was designed to help SEBs understand the value of a business plan and capability statement, and to learn how to develop and integrate these tools into their business practices.

Of the ten SEBs interviewed during the needs assessment conducted by the subcontractor CANDO Corporation, none had business plans or capability statements. To help SEBs reach their business goals and more effectively communicate their strengths and experience to prospective clients, the subcontractor CANDO Corporation held a webinar on business plans and capability statements. The webinar stressed the importance of creating a business plan to help businesses set and achieve goals, and inform SEBs about the types, use, and benefits of capability statements. Webinar attendance was not recorded.

RENEWABLE ENERGY CONTRACTOR CLINIC, IN-PERSON EVENT, CHICAGO URBAN LEAGUE, JANUARY 23, 2024

This event marked the Small and Emerging Business team's first in-person gathering and was designed to provide a comprehensive introduction to state solar programs, upcoming grant opportunities through the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO), and financing options available via the Illinois Finance Authority. It also aimed to connect contractors with program administration staff and raise awareness of the support services offered by program administrators.

The Small and Emerging Business team partnered with the Chicago Urban League and Illinois Shines to host a Renewable Energy Contractor Clinic. This event provided current and prospective contractors and Approved Vendors with overviews of the Illinois Shines and Illinois Solar for All programs and features of the programs of particular interest to SEBs. Attendees received a tutorial on Renewable Energy Credits (RECs), including what they are and how they are calculated, and learned about upcoming funding opportunities through the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) and the Illinois Finance Authority. A networking reception followed the presentations,

offering contractors the opportunity to connect with program administrators and fellow industry professionals.

Attendee count: 49

Feedback:

- Ninety percent of attendees responding to the exit survey questions “How satisfied were you with the overall event?” and “How satisfied were you with the program?” answered “Very much.”
- Respondents added comments - “I appreciate the commitment to advancing Small Business.” “We are very excited about what Illinois is doing and what Illinois has planned for the future.” “Thank you for the great event.”

FINDING YOUR NICHE IN THE ILSFA PROGRAM WEBINAR, JANUARY 31, 2024

This event was intended to offer contractors and aspiring solar business owners a first-hand perspective from a successful ILSFA Approved Vendor and solar project developer. The session highlighted the various job functions within the solar industry and the skill sets required for each. The goal was to inspire new SEBs and clean energy job seekers to explore business growth strategies and career pathways in the renewable energy sector.

Ky Ajayi, president and owner of ILSFA Approved Vendor Central Road Energy and Solar Project Developer at StraightUp Solar, presented on his career pathway and the different “hats” he wears in his work. Central Road Energy is one of the first Approved Vendor Aggregators to develop projects in ILSFA and has a history of many approved projects, working with a variety of different solar installation companies. Mr. Ajayi gave an overview of his solar industry journey and suggestions on how others might define their career path, encouraging participants to explore the industry beyond installation/labor-intensive roles. He encouraged attendees to think about the need for and opportunities available in the creative and problem-solving aspects of work, such as project development, marketing, engineering and design, energy analysis, and the role of the Approved Vendor.

Attendee count: 23

GOVERNMENT CERTIFICATIONS, WEBINAR, FEBRUARY 13, 2024

This workshop is intended to make SEBs aware of the definitions, eligibility requirements, use, and benefits of government certifications for small businesses.

Government certifications such as Minority and Women-Owned Business Enterprise (MWBE) designations can be instrumental in accessing local, state, and federal contracts specifically intended for certified businesses. Certification can provide access to contracting opportunities on public sector projects or with corporations that have

supplier diversity goals. Leveraging certification can help elevate underrepresented business owners and strengthen local economies. Sub-contractor CANDO Corporation presented on the types (DBE, M/WBE, VBE, BEP), benefits, and the process for obtaining certification. CANDO Corporation provided 1:1 assistance to obtain MBE certification with an ILSFA Approved Vendor post-presentation.

Attendee count: 21

Feedback:

- “Awesome! Thank you! 😊 Great presentation and information.”
- “Thanks for the information, it was very helpful.”
- “This was great information.”

MARKETING YOUR BUSINESS IN THE ILSFA PROGRAM, ONLINE AND IN-PERSON, POLSKY CENTER, FEBRUARY 27, 2024

This event is intended to provide SEBs with practical marketing strategies to grow their businesses and to clarify the ILSFA marketing requirements.

Marketing Associate Emily Chan presented an overview of ILSFA marketing requirements, highlighting key resources and processes that Approved Vendors must follow when promoting their services. Her presentation covered both pre-approved marketing materials and those developed independently by vendors. Subcontractor Angel Jones, CEO, Golden Angel Marketing, shared foundational marketing principles, strategies for increasing brand visibility, tips for lead generation and customer acquisition, and guidance on crafting messaging that resonates with ILSFA audiences. The event concluded with an in-person networking reception, offering attendees the opportunity to connect with peers and program staff.

Attendee count: 17 in person, 20 online

Feedback:

- “Online was difficult to stay engaged. But appreciate the opportunity to sit in and observe.”

ACCESS TO CAPITAL, IN-PERSON NAACP WESTSIDE BRANCH, CHICAGO, MARCH 26, 2024

The Small and Emerging Business team convened a workshop at the Austin community NAACP branch on Chicago’s West Side. The event's purpose was to educate and inform current and potential contractors and Approved Vendors about different options to access capital to grow their businesses and project pipelines.

This event originated in Small and Emerging Business team discussions with Carl Ellis, Chairperson, Economic Development Committee, NAACP. Mr. Ellis was interested in

spreading awareness of the solar market, state solar programs, and opportunities for business owners. Given that solar project development requires viable business capital, the event was organized around the theme “access to capital.” Speakers included:

- Wendell Harris, Executive Vice President, presented on the Chicago Community Loan Fund
- John Taflan, Advantage Illinois Team Member, presented on the Advantage Illinois State Small Business Credit Initiative
- Aaron McEvoy, DCEO CEJA Grants Manager, presented on the Equitable Energy Future & Community Solar Energy Sovereignty Grant
- Eric Strickland, Director, presented on the Austin African American Business Networking Association
- Jan Gudell, Associate Director of ILSFA, provided an overview of the Illinois Solar for All Program.

Attendee count: 31

Feedback:

- “The workshop was very helpful.”
- “This was great, very informative, thank you for including me.” “Very informative”
- “The event was excellent, and I would love to be notified of future events as well as be a spokesperson for the returning citizens demographic.”
- “Thanks for a great event!”
- “I love the effort that you guys put into getting us together. “Great job to all the presenters and organizers! Thanks.” “Thank you for your service and support.”
- “Thank you for a very complete workshop, very informative and helpful.”

SOLAR ENERGY CONTRACTORS CLINIC, IN-PERSON ILLINOIS CENTRAL COLLEGE, APRIL 23, 2024

This event is intended to expand outreach into central Illinois, establish and strengthen connections with local contractors and job seekers. The Small and Emerging Business team hosted a regional workshop aimed at introducing participants to key program administration staff and raising awareness of the support and resources available through Illinois’ state solar programs. The event was designed to foster relationships, share practical information, and empower small businesses with tools to engage in the clean energy economy.

The workshop featured an overview of state solar programs, small local business support resources, and upcoming grant funding opportunities. Denise Moore, founder of the Minority Business Development Center, facilitated the event, which included speakers:

- Shon Harris, CEO of LiveWire and an Illinois Shines and ILSFA Approved Vendor, shared his journey from warehouse worker to IBEW journeyman to electrical contractor/solar entrepreneur.
- Ola Tomaszewski, Project Manager, presented an overview of the Illinois Shines Program.

- Jan Gudell, Associate Director, provided an overview of the Illinois Solar for All Program.
- Aaron McEvoy, DCEO CEJA Grants Manager, introduced the Equitable Energy Future Grant.
- Ky Ajayi, CEO of Central Road Energy and ILSFA Approved Vendor, delivered his “Finding Your Niche in the Solar Industry” presentation.

The event concluded with a networking session, giving attendees the opportunity to connect directly with program staff and fellow professionals. The workshop also received local media coverage from Channel 25 News, helping to amplify its reach and impact.

Attendee count: 26

Feedback:

- “I need an introduction session on the basics of solar. This was a very great presentation, thank you.”
- “More lead time on the invites. I didn't hear about this event until 2 weeks before. Today was a good overview of most topics. Thank you! Keep up the good work!!”

ILSFA SOLAR ENERGY CONTRACTORS CLINIC, IN-PERSON, ILLINOIS CENTRAL COLLEGE, JULY 29, 2024

The intent of this event was similar to that of the April event, but with added goals of reaching a larger audience and adding a dedicated networking session to facilitate the introduction of job seekers to companies actively developing solar projects in the central Illinois region.

The ILSFA Small and Emerging Business team collaborated with Illinois Shines, DCEO, and the Minority Business Development Center to hold a solar energy clinic to build on the momentum of the event held in April. Local event collaborator Denise Moore, CEO/Founder of the Minority Business Development Center, led outreach to reach a wider pool of contractors in the area.

Program staff presented attendees with the Illinois Shines and ILSFA programs, and the following individuals spoke at the event:

- Anna Solorio, CEO of Crystal R Consulting, and Jan Gudell, Associate Director ILSFA, gave overviews of the Illinois Shines and Illinois Solar for All programs, respectively, covering the program goals, participation pathways for contractors/Approved Vendors, requirements, and support and resources.
- Aaron McEvoy, DCEO CEJA Grants Manager, and Nate Keener, DCEO CEJA Central Regional Administrator, gave presentations on the status of Equitable Energy Future Grant applications, upcoming grant funding for solar development, and CEJA updates.
- Todd Hansen, Director of Deployment at solar developer Nexamp, presented on Nexamp’s pipeline of large solar development projects scheduled for central Illinois and the subcontracting process.

- Ky Ajayi, CEO of Central Road Energy and Solar Developer of Straight Up Solar, discussed Workforce Development needs.

After the presentations, an informal job fair was held in the adjacent room, allowing job seekers, subcontractors, solar energy program graduates, and trainees to connect with contractors. A networking reception followed.

Attendee count: 59

Feedback:

- “Very Informative Event...”
“I was really impressed with the presenters! I loved it!”
“I truly appreciate the meeting. I look forward to the future. Thank you.” “Very informative event”
“Keep bringing events like these to the college community.”
“I definitely enjoyed the event, and I got a lot of information.”

RENEWABLE ENERGY CONTRACTOR CLINIC, IN-PERSON HIRE360 CHICAGO, OCTOBER 21, 2024

This event is intended to provide contractors with an introduction to the programs, resources, and teams available to support them in the clean energy space. The program presented the Equity Eligible Contractor registration process, Illinois Shines and Illinois Solar for All registration, DCEO grant opportunities, information on working capital loans, certification support, and other no-cost resources for contractors that HIRE360 provides.

Chicago-based workforce development and apprenticeship nonprofit Hire360 invited the ILSFA Small and Emerging Business team, Illinois Shines, DCEO, Illinois Finance Authority, Cook County Small Business Source, and Approved Vendor ADL Solutions to present at a Renewable Energy Contractor Clinic.

The following individuals spoke at the event:

- State Senator Mattie Hunter provided opening remarks.
- Hire360’s Jay Rowell, Executive Director, and Deborah Whitaker, Director of Business Development, provided an overview of Hire360’s new facility and efforts in clean energy workforce and contractor support.
- Ola Tomaszewski, Project Manager of Illinois Shines, spoke about the Equity Eligible Contractor (EEC) designation and how to participate in Illinois Shines.
- Jan Gudell, Associate Director, presented an overview of ILSFA.
- Karen Youngblood, Consultant to the Chicago Urban League, presented an overview of the organization and its involvement with onsite solar project development and solar training.
- ADL Solutions, LLC CEO Joseph Smith gave his perspective on working as an Equity Eligible Contractor and challenges he faced with business planning and accessing state grant funding.

- Aaron McEvoy, DCEO CEJA Grants Manager, gave presentations on the Equitable Energy Future & Community Solar Energy Sovereignty grants, followed by colleague Nate Keener, DCEO CEJA Central Regional Administrator, who gave an overview of CEJA Workforce programs.
- Lesley McCain, Executive Director, presented an overview of the Illinois Solar Education Association and invited contractors to get involved.
- Chris Meister, CEO, gave an overview of financing options available through the Illinois Climate Bank.
- Domini Gamble, Program Manager of Cook County Small Business Source, talked about the free resources available to grow small businesses.

A networking reception followed the presentations.

Attendee count: 36

LEVERAGING DIGITAL TOOLS FOR BUSINESS GROWTH, IN-PERSON AND WEBINAR, POLSKY CENTER CHICAGO, OCTOBER 30, 2024

This event covered the same topic areas as the February 27, 2024, event, with the goal of reaching businesses that did not attend in February.

The ILSFA Small & Emerging Business team hosted a workshop featuring a live presentation by Angel Jones, CEO of Golden Angel Management, followed by a recorded ILSFA marketing video presentation by Emily Chan, Marketing Associate at Elevate. The presentations covered strategies for increasing brand visibility and recognition, tips for generating leads and acquiring new customers, the basics of the Illinois Solar for All program, ILSFA marketing guidelines, and sample social media posts.

Attendee count: 3 in-person, 14 online

Feedback:

- “If possible, I’d love to see future workshops covering the crucial steps that need to be completed before installation even begins. Topics like sourcing land for solar projects, navigating agreements with landowners, handling necessary paperwork, and understanding the submissions required by regulatory authorities would be incredibly helpful for contractors like me who are new to the field.”

CLEAN ENERGY EQUITY SUMMIT, IN-PERSON, THE SPRINGFIELD PROJECT, FEBRUARY 26-27, 2025

The Small and Emerging Business team collaborated with Illinois Shines and DCEO to hold a Clean Energy Equity Summit with a focus on the progress and challenges of achieving equity in the Illinois clean energy economy. The overarching intent was to provide a space for learning, giving SEBs an opportunity to meet with program administrators and share feedback on what was working and what could be improved with state programs. Moreover, SEBs expressed concerns about recent federal announcements to roll back support for clean energy and DEI initiatives; the Clean

Energy Equity Summit would provide space to hear questions and give program administrators and state legislators an opportunity to respond. This was the most ambitious Small and Emerging Business event to date – a two-day Summit with multi-fold goals:

- Reaffirm the state’s commitment to clean energy and diverse contractor support.
- Educate contractors about the Illinois Shines and ILSFA programs.
- Educate contractors on DCEO grants and provide a status update on the awards to date. Get feedback on the grant application process from contractors.
- Inform contractors of upcoming solar developments in need of subcontractors.
- Educate contractors on the Minimum Equity Standards and Equity Accountability System status.
- Provide a venue to connect small contractors and businesses to Approved Vendors and prime contractors.
- Highlight state program coordination in supporting small and emerging businesses in the clean energy sector and provide a venue for small and emerging businesses to share challenges and successes in the clean energy space.
- Reach a contractor audience in central Illinois and the state capital region.

The first day of the summit included the following presentations:

- Equitable Energy Future & Community Solar Energy Sovereignty Grant updates – Aaron McEvoy, DCEO CEJA Grants Manager, provided an organizational overview and results to date of the EEF grant applications. \$10.3MM had been approved for 12 projects in Round 1. Hilary Scott-Ogunrinde, Deputy Director DCEO, discussed the upcoming Notice of Funding Opportunities and CEJA Workforce Hubs.
- Illinois Finance Authority/Climate Bank - Maria Colangelo, Senior Vice President, presented on the Illinois Finance Authority Energy Efficiency Revolving Loan Fund and the State Small Business Credit Team.
- Ola Tomaszewski, Project Manager, presented on Illinois Shines program metrics, Equity Eligible Contractor participation, and Advance of Capital.
- Kelly Turner and Ella Johnson-McGowan of the Illinois Power Agency presented on the Equity Accountability System Assessment and the Energy Workforce Equity portal.

Delmar Gillus, Chief Operating Officer of Elevate, moderated an Equity Eligible Contractor Panel that discussed challenges faced in growing their businesses, applying for DCEO grants and small business loans, and connecting with eligible job training programs and trainees. The panelists were

- Joseph Smith, CEO of ADL Solutions
- Ky Ajayi, CEO of Central Road Energy
- Christopher Williams, CEO of Millennium Solar Electric Training Academy
- Marion Jones, Vice President, Workforce Development at Nexamp
- Michael Callahan, President of Comfort 1st Insulation
- Derrell Black, Founder of Blacktech Solutions Corp.

Paris McConnell, External Affairs Manager of Illinois Lt. Governor Juliana Stratton’s office, welcomed the audience to Springfield. Representative Marcus Evans of the 33rd

district highlighted the importance of the clean energy industry in Illinois and the prominence Illinois had taken as a world leader in its support of clean energy and equity. The first day concluded with a networking reception.

The second day of the summit began with a repeat presentation from Aaron McEvoy of DCEO, to ensure that attendees who were not present the previous day would learn about the Equitable Energy Future & Community Solar Sovereignty Grant updates. The second day of the summit included the following presentations:

- Jan Gudell of ILSFA presented an overview of community solar as a model, highlighting possible market entry points for small businesses
- Nexamp’s Marion Jones, Vice President, Workforce Development & DEI Engagement, made a presentation on the company’s solar project pipeline and invited contractors to contact her colleague, Todd Hansen, Director of Deployment, for details and onboarding requirements.
- Nate Keener, DCEO CEJA Central Regional Administrator, moderated a CEJA Workforce Hubs and Teams panel discussion featuring:
 - Dominic Watson – President of the Springfield Project
 - Tamika Thomas – Director of CEJA Programs at Richland Community College
 - Ky Ajayi – Central Road Energy
 - Shateveon Goforth – Regional Equity Advisor at HIRE360 Partners

Tonya Johnon of the Small and Emerging Business team closed the event with a summary of action items.

Attendee count: 209

Feedback:

- Open-ended feedback wasn’t requested in the exit survey. Attendees were asked, “How satisfied were you with the program?” 80% responded “Very much”, and 20% responded “Quite a bit.”

Small And Emerging Business Team Event Attendance Metrics

The following table summarizes attendance at the Small and Emerging Business team events through February 2025. These events covered various topics geared to the small and emerging business audience. The average attendance was 33 people per event, but attendance ranged based on the event from 17 to 209.

Small and Emerging Business Initiative Events	Event Type	Event Date	Attendee Count
Business Plans and Capability Statements	Webinar	January 16, 2024	NA
Renewable Energy Contractor Clinic	In-person	January 23, 2024	49
Finding Your Niche in the ILSFA Program	Webinar	January 31, 2024	23
Government Certifications	Webinar	February 13, 2024	21

Marketing Your Business in the ILSFA Program	Hybrid	February 27, 2024	37
Access to Capital	In-person	March 26, 2024	31
Solar Energy Contractors Clinic	In-person	April 23, 2024	26
ILSFA Solar Energy Contractors Clinic	In-person	July 29, 2024	59
Renewable Energy Contractor Clinic	In-person	October 21, 2024	36
Leveraging Digital Tools for Business Growth	Hybrid	October 30, 2024	17
Clean Energy Equity Summit	In-person	February 26-27, 2025	209
Total			508

New Resources

Small businesses across Illinois are interested in exploring opportunities in the solar industry, but many find the available ILSFA documents resources overwhelming and difficult to navigate. While the Illinois Solar for All Approved Vendor Manual offers detailed program guidance, its length and technical depth make it inaccessible to those seeking a basic understanding of how to get started in the program. Recognizing this gap, the Small and Emerging Business team worked on developing new resources to build user-friendly resources to help reduce barriers to entry for small and emerging firms.

Small and Emerging Business Guide

Working in conjunction with the Illinois Shines program, the Small and Emerging Business team released A Small and Emerging Business's Guide to Participating with Illinois Shines and Illinois Solar for All in February 2024. This guide presents a step-by-step process of becoming an Approved Vendor with Illinois Shines and Illinois Solar for All, and it provides businesses with supplemental information to access the solar market. The guide consolidates information that is spread over multiple websites from multiple organizations. It condenses key information into a 14-page document to help SEBs move up the learning curve quickly. The Guide was made available on the Illinois Shines and ILSFA website, and later, the Small and Emerging Business Hub described below.

Small and Emerging Business Hub

The Illinois Power Agency developed the [Small & Emerging Business Hub](#) with input from the Small and Emerging Business team. Like the Guide mentioned above, the Small and Emerging Business Hub centralizes information and resources to help small businesses

navigate the clean energy landscape with access to the state incentive programs, small business support resources, workforce and training programs, and grant and funding opportunities. The Hub went online in September 2024.

Small And Emerging Business Team Key Metrics And Outcomes

As part of its efforts to lower barriers for small and emerging businesses entering the solar market, the Small and Emerging Business team held one-on-one meetings and offered technical assistance to businesses. These services have helped businesses navigate program requirements, clarify eligibility, and strengthen their competitiveness in applying for grants and incentives. The following metrics highlight the volume and impact of this direct support over the reporting period.

SMALL AND EMERGING BUSINESS TEAM 1:1 SUPPORT MEETINGS

The Small and Emerging Business team (subcontractor CANDO Corporation and Elevate staff) held one-on-one meetings with small and emerging businesses to provide tailored guidance on a wide range of topics – including ILSFA and Illinois Shines Approved Vendor registration, Illinois Shines Equity Eligible Contractor designation, ILSFA program structure, REC incentives, project and participant eligibility, sub-program budgets, submittal windows, the Approved Vendor Manual, grant applications, consumer protections, customer contract requirements, and solar feasibility assessment. These meetings are rooted in the understanding that many SEBs are new to the solar industry and may have limited or no familiarity with how the solar programs operate. Rather than assume a baseline level of knowledge, the Small and Emerging Business team meets business owners where they are, taking time to explain program basics, processes, and requirements step by step. This approach helps ensure that SEBs can meaningfully engage with the ILSFA program. One-on-one meetings also create space to build rapport, understand each business’s goals and challenges, and address specific questions relevant to their path into the solar market. These sessions are especially valuable following events, providing business owners the chance to dive deeper into topics in a personalized setting.

SMALL AND EMERGING BUSINESS TEAM TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE DCEO GRANT APPLICATIONS

The Small and Emerging Business team hosted six outreach events where attendees learned about the DCEO Equitable Energy Future Grant (EEFG) and Community Solar Energy Sovereignty Grant. The EEFG provides seed funding and pre-development funding opportunities to Equity Eligible Contractors (“EECs”) to work on renewable energy projects in low-income and historically disadvantaged communities. Qualified entities can apply for grants from \$250,000 to \$1,000,000. The Community Solar Energy Sovereignty Grant (CSESG) Program supports pre-development and development of

community solar projects that promote community ownership and energy sovereignty—grant awards range from \$50,000 to \$1,000,000.

The Small and Emerging Business team provided technical assistance to nine SEBs submitting 13 applications (some applications included two businesses). Four SEBs submitting first-round EEFG applications were awarded a total of \$2.6 million. Five SEBs submitted second-round EEFG applications, four of which have moved to merit review or negotiation at the time of this report. In addition, one Small and Emerging Business received technical assistance to apply for the DCEO Small Business Capital and Infrastructure grant in April 2025.

The following table summarizes key metrics related to Small and Emerging Business activities. This includes the ILSFA AV registration process, one-on-one technical assistance meetings, Small and Emerging Business team events, Small and Emerging Business ILSFA project applications, and DCEO grant application metrics.

SEB Metrics	
ILSFA SEB AV Registration Applications Submitted	18
SEB Initiative 1:1 Support Meetings 10/23-04/25	304
Average number SEB 1:1 Support Meetings per Month	17
SEB Initiative Events Held	11
Average attendance at SEB Events	51
Total Attendance at SEB Events	508
Part I ILSFA Project Applications PY6 and PY7 (4 AVs)	20
Part II ILSFA Project Applications PY6 and PY7 (4 AVs)	51
Round 1 EEFG Applications Submitted by SEBs	9
Round 1 EEFG Awards to SEBs	4
Round 1 EEFG Total Award	\$2.6 million

Conclusion and Outlook

Lessons Learned

Over the past year and a half, the Small and Emerging Business team has provided technical assistance, event programming, and targeted support for small and emerging businesses. This has yielded valuable insights into what drives impact and engagement in this space.

Event programming does more than disseminate information—events stimulate partnership formation, peer learning, and practical connections. Participants have

gained access to grant and loan opportunities, industry knowledge, and new business avenues, including subcontracting work with larger firms, and smaller firms collaborating on funding and project opportunities. These connections have helped small businesses navigate the solar industry's complexities and pursue growth strategies.

Changes in federal policy toward clean energy and equity have created concerns in the solar market, notably among small and emerging businesses and diverse contractors, many of whom are just beginning to establish solar project plans. The Small and Emerging Business team collaborated with other entities to hold a two-day Clean Energy Equity Summit in Springfield in February 2025 to address these concerns and highlight state efforts to advance equity in the energy sector. With limited marketing, high demand for the event forced registration closure two weeks early.

Partnering with local nonprofits and community organizations to host outreach events connects the Small and Emerging Business team to target communities and networks. Hosting events directly in the communities we aim to serve supports the local economy and sends the message that the program meets people where they are. These efforts help build trust and make programming more accessible and relevant.

Looking Ahead: Opportunities For Continued Support

Moving forward, the Small and Emerging Business team will continue to provide one-on-one technical assistance and individualized meetings to support small and emerging businesses as they navigate the solar market and participate in ILSFA. This direct support helps businesses understand program requirements, build capacity, and take actionable steps toward project development. The Small and Emerging Business team's plans for the upcoming program year are informed by feedback collected from event participants through exit surveys, one-on-one support meetings, as well as issues identified by the program administration team's interactions with small and emerging businesses. The Small and Emerging Business team will continue collaborating with other state programs and agencies whenever possible, recognizing that greater impact can be achieved through coordinated efforts. The Small and Emerging Business team sees value in adopting a regional approach to this work, as the solar market—and the businesses and customers it serves—varies across different parts of Illinois. Regional differences in project types, market maturity, and community needs make it critical to tailor outreach and technical support to local contexts.

Building off the lessons learned from the first year of action, the Small and Emerging Business team sees a need for continued support for small and emerging businesses in the following areas:



- **Continued inter-agency/program coordination.** Small and emerging businesses reported that they appreciate the ability to learn about the state’s solar programs and other state agencies’ small business support opportunities at the same event. Moving forward, the team will coordinate with the IPA’s DEI team to align efforts and areas of focus.
- **Regional Small and Emerging Business engagement.** To ensure support efforts address the needs of SEBs across Illinois, the Small and Emerging Business team will explore the idea of working in three state regions (north, central, south) and establishing connections with local Small and Emerging Business groups. These regional groups may help extend program reach and foster engagement with businesses operating in different geographic and economic contexts. Small and emerging businesses face unique challenges shaped by local conditions, infrastructure, workforce availability, and market demand. This localized engagement may enable the Small and Emerging Business team to tailor technical assistance, resources, and outreach strategies more effectively and leverage the capacities of the regional groups.