



## INCUBATOR PROGRAM FAQs

### PROGRAM OVERVIEW AND STRUCTURE

#### **What exactly is the Incubator program?**

**Answer:** Grantees, such as colleges and non-profit organizations, lead the program for their respective geographic hub. The program provides contractors with access to various necessities to develop a smaller or newer business. These include access to low-cost capital, support for obtaining insurance, assistance registering to become a state vendor, connections with firms hiring subcontractors, and training and support.

#### **How is the Incubator Program different from the Accelerator Program?**

**Answer:** The Incubator focuses on emerging contractors who are just entering the clean energy industry and need foundational business support. The Primes Accelerator serves contractors who already have some operational capacity and are looking to scale their businesses through long-term planning, mentorship, and operational grants.

#### **Can contractors participate in both the Incubator and the Primes Accelerator?**

**Answer:** Yes, but participation must be coordinated to avoid duplication of services and funding. Contractors who complete the Incubator program may be strong candidates for the Primes Accelerator, which focuses on strategic growth and multi-year business scaling. DCEO encourages alignment and referrals between programs.

**What clean energy sectors are included in the program?**

**Answer:** Eligible sectors include, but are not limited to: solar PV installation, energy efficiency retrofits, weatherization, EV charging infrastructure, battery storage, grid modernization, HVAC, and related trades.

**How long does the incubator advising and technical assistance period last?**

**Answer:** The legislation does not identify a specific length of time, so the specific timeframe, per hub, is flexible. Advising and technical assistance timelines and curriculum should be developed to meet the needs of participants and the service area.

The Incubator grant lasts for one year, with opportunities for second and third-year extensions.

**How does the Department decide to renew a grantee for another 12 month term?**

**Answer:** Renewal is largely based on grant performance, the performance of the grantee, and availability of CEJA funds.

**How many geographic hubs are awarded grants?**

**Answer:** Fourteen geographic hubs will be awarded, with one award per hub. The fourteen hubs are: Chicago (South Side), Chicago (Southwest and West Sides), Waukegan, Kankakee, Rockford, Aurora, Joliet, Peoria, Champaign, Danville, Decatur, Carbondale, East St Louis, and Alton.

**What is the difference between my Network Coordinator and Grant Manager?**

**Answer:** The Network Coordinator is your primary contact for implementation, tools, reporting assistance, and support. The Grant Manager is your contact for the application process, reporting requirements, and budget management. Your specific Grant Manager is assigned in the grant agreement.

**CONTRACTOR PARTICIPATION AND ELIGIBILITY**

**How is it determined which contractors are accepted into our program?**

**Answer:** As the grantee, you would be responsible for promoting the program, collecting contractor applications, and determining participant eligibility. Guidance and processes for each of these are outlined in the program manual. DCEO does offer forms and support for all three of these aspects.

**Are there geographic requirements for contractor participation?**

**Answer:** Participants must reside in your designated hub area, with some exceptions for nearby locations.

**If a contractor signs up as a participant but the Incubator does not feel they are a good fit for the program, how should they approach this?**

**Answer:** Please contact your Network Coordinator for guidance.

## **GRANTEE ROLES AND STAFFING**

**What positions would we have to hire to administer this program?**

**Answer:** You are required to designate a Program Lead to devote at least one 100% full time equivalent to managing the program. You must also maintain multiple staff members, either full-time, part-time, contractual, or sub-contractual, to support the delivery of program elements such as administration, outreach and recruitment, business coaching, business training, mentorship coordination, business development advising, business professional networking support, and clean energy training. Common roles also include a Fiscal Manager, Marketing & Outreach Coordinator, and Training Coordinator. These roles and common duties are outlined in the program manual.

Salaries and fringe benefits for staff and contractors should be included in grant funding. Current staff may also be assigned a certain percentage of their time to devote to the program, of which the same percentage of salary and fringe benefits may be included in grant funding.

**Can the Incubator staff budget and participate in professional development?**

**Answer:** Yes. However, if an incubator plans to directly finance a professional development opportunity for a staff member using grant dollars, outside of regular meetings with other CEJA hubs and DCEO, a detailed justification must be submitted to their designated Network Coordinator.

**Does the Department offer any professional development?**

**Answer:** Yes, the Office of Employment and Training supports innovative workforce programs, career training, and employment services. This includes Illinois WorkNet, WIOA Works Illinois, Apprenticeship Illinois, Trade Adjustment Assistance Program (TAA), Layoff Notices and Plant Closings (WARN), WIOA Success Stories, Illinois Workforce Development System (IWDS), and various CEJA related trainings. For more information, contact 217-986-1397 or email [workforce@illinois.gov](mailto:workforce@illinois.gov).

## **FUNDING, BUDGETING, AND REQUIREMENTS**

**How does the funding and reimbursement work?**

**Answer:** As the grantee, you pay grant related fees and expenses as they arise, then submit

reimbursement requests to DCEO within a minimum of 30 days of the end of each quarter (unless differing billing schedule, such as monthly, has been agreed to in the grant agreement). Payment from DCEO is then reviewed and sent to the Comptroller Office for distribution. The process for requesting advanced funds is outlined in your grant agreement (if applicable).

**What percentage of funding does DCEO cover / Is match funding is required?**

**Answer:** The grant is fully funded by DCEO. There is no match funding required.

**What program costs are allowable and reimbursable?**

**Answer:** Generally allowable costs include personnel salary, fringe benefits, in-state travel, supplies and equipment, training, consultant and contractor services, indirect costs, and marketing. If you are unsure on a cost, notify your Network Coordinator and/or Grant Manager prior to making the expense.

**What costs are not allowed and not reimbursed?**

**Answer:** Costs generally disallowed include entertainment, alcohol, lobbying, fines and penalties, fundraising, gifts and incentives, bad debts, personal use items, and pre-award costs. If you are unsure on a cost, notify your Network Coordinator and/or Grant Manager prior to making the expense.

**What does a budget variance do and what is allowed?**

**Answer:** You are permitted to modify up to 10% between line items in your budget. For changes over 10%, a new budget submission and approval is required. Notify your Grant Manager and Network Coordinator to initiate the budget modification process.

**What can be categorized as debt and non-debt financing?**

**Answer:** Debt financing includes repayable loans and bonding. Non-debt financing includes grants, equity, and forgivable loans.

**Can an Incubator charge food to the grant?**

**Answer:** Yes, reasonable food costs for program related events are permitted.

**Can an Incubator charge personnel PTO time to the grant?**

**Answer:** Yes, paid time off for full time employees of the program may be charged to the grant. Paid time off for employees that are assigned a specific percentage of time to the program may also be charged to the program, provided the PTO is split in the same manner.

**Can an Incubator provide stipends or grants to participants?**

**Answer:** Stipends or grants to participants are generally not allowed in year one. Beginning

in year two, stipends for participants are permitted if certain criteria is met. Check with your Network Coordinator for further clarification.

**What technical assistance are we required to present to contractors?**

**Answer:** Incubators will provide access to a comprehensive range of contractor support services, including business development, access to capital, bid preparation, mentorship opportunities, and industry training. Additionally, Incubators will provide assistance with insurance, bonding, vendor registration, certifications (e.g., MBE/DBE), and connections to Department of Labor resources for prevailing wage compliance. The goal is to help small or emerging contractors overcome market entry barriers and scale their businesses.

**What success stories are required?**

**Answer:** You are required to submit at least six success stories per year. Examples include business growth, contract acquisition, workforce impact, capacity building, community impact, and personal growth. This can be done in the Department-approved CRM WorkNet with additional guidance provided by the Program Administrator.

**REPORTING AND COMPLIANCE**

**Are we required to submit reports to DCEO?**

**Answer:** Yes, you are required to submit various reports to DCEO. Most notably, a Periodic Financial Report (“PFR”) and Periodic Performance Report (“PPR”) are due 30 days after the end each quarter. A Performance Metrics Report and Monthly Narrative Report are due monthly. A Project Dashboard, for use as a Work Breakdown Structure (WBS), is also in place to help monitor your progress in various grant-related tasks. Regular programmatic reporting will be required in the Department-approved CRM. This includes any participant information including intake, notes from one-on-one consultations, metric tracking, and training attendance. DCEO staff will work with you to ensure all appropriate reporting is submitted as necessary.

**How long must the Incubator retain files?**

**Answer:** All participant records must be retained for a minimum of three years following program completion, as well as three years following participant separation from the program.

**What are the confidentiality requirements for this program?**

**Answer:** You must protect personal information regarding applicants’ foster care or criminal history status; while aggregated data is allowed, individual identities must remain confidential, unless such individual provides written consent for disclosure. Participant files must be stored in a secure and confidential location to protect sensitive information.

**What qualifies as a job created?**

**Answer:** A permanent, full-time job established as a result of the program.

**MEETINGS, EVENTS, AND ADVISORY BOARD****How often do we have to meet with DCEO?**

**Answer:** You are expected to participate in regular meetings with DCEO. Currently, we anticipate one virtual meeting per month, and DCEO staff to visit your site once per year.

**How often do we have to host events?**

**Answer:** You must host at least two events per year in which local, state, or federal legislators are invited to attend. Although not required, additional marketing and outreach events are encouraged.

**What is required of the Advisory Board?**

**Answer:** The advisory board must include at least seven members. The board must include a diverse mix of stakeholders, such as, but not limited to: clean energy technicians, union reps, non-union leaders, local government officials, CEJA program hub leads, housing authority staff, chambers of commerce, business associations, business owners, financing reps, environmental justice advocates, faith-based organization reps, or community based organization leaders.

You are required to submit your proposed board membership to the Department for review and approval prior to finalizing the board.

Meetings are required to be at least once per year, though more frequent meetings are strongly encouraged. The role of the board is to provide feedback on the program and the needs of the region.

**What is required for travel outside of the service area?**

**Answer:** If you plan to travel outside of your service territory using program funds, you must notify your Network Coordinator at least 14 days in advance. Travel must be approved prior to departure to ensure reimbursement of costs. Detailed requirements for your request are outlined in the program manual.