

Written by Erin Wilson
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STEP grant will expand access to global markets for Illinois small businesses

CHICAGO – September 28, 2012. Governor Pat Quinn and U.S. Senator Dick Durbin today announced that Illinois will receive a \$1.07 million federal grant through the U.S. Small Business Administration's State Trade and Export Promotion Program (STEP) to increase trade and investment in the state. Today's announcement will help the state meet Governor Quinn's goal to double exports by 2014 and comes on the heels of his six-day trade mission to Brazil where he met with government and business leaders to strengthen bilateral cooperation in manufacturing, agriculture, biotechnology and education.

"We want to help small and mid-sized businesses in Illinois gain access to the world's fastest growing markets," Governor Quinn said. "As Illinois companies compete on a global stage, this program provides a stepping stone to increase their sales overseas and fuel job growth at home."

"This funding will provide assistance and guidance to Illinois' successful small businesses that are trying to expand overseas, which will allow them to grow their business and create jobs right here at home," said U.S. Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL). "It will also give small businesses that are already exporting the opportunity to take advantage of the financial and technical resources they need to generate more revenue and growth."

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The STEP program is a three-year pilot trade and export initiative authorized by the federal Small Business Jobs Act of 2010. Funding will be used to raise the dollar of export sales in Illinois by providing high-impact financial and technical assistance to small and medium-sized businesses. STEP funding will also go towards foreign market trade missions for small and medium-sized businesses. For the first time, funding will also assist Illinois' small and medium sized businesses with the ability to achieve the critical product compliance certifications required for exporting. It is estimated that the STEP grant will enable the state to provide assistance to more than 150 companies.

Last year, Illinois was awarded its first STEP grant of \$1.2 million. The competitive funding allowed Illinois to assist more than 120 companies, one-third of which were either new to exporting or new to the market. The companies reported to the state that the pilot program is helping them generate combined more than \$150 million in sales in the first year. One-third of the STEP companies qualify as minority, women or veteran-owned businesses or are located in a rural part of the state.

On-Call Surgical Services LLC, located in Zion, Illinois, participated in a group trade mission to "Promote 2011" in Yaounde, Cameroon December 3-11, 2011. During the show, they met with three companies who signed orders on-site totaling \$150,000 and have estimated additional sales of \$500,000 within the next 12 months. On-call recruits, manages, trains and staffs human capital in the health care and information technology industries. Additionally, they distribute medical, surgical and life science products and equipment.

"The state's trade mission to Cameroon provided the opportunity for 'face-time' with potential customers and opened our eyes to new market opportunities outside of the U.S. to grow our business," said Ronnell Showell, CEO, On-Call Surgical Services LLC. "Since then, we have established business partners and are working on securing medical equipment through Cameroon Government Tender. This opportunity was very profitable in networking and cultural experience, but moreover has been a dream come true. Thanks to the entire staff at the DCEO Office of Trade and Investment, it would have been difficult for us to break into this market if it hadn't been for the OTI-STEP assistance."

The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, Office of Trade and Investment (OTI) will administer Illinois' STEP grant. The STEP program last year was implemented with the strong support and assistance of state and federal partners including: the US Small Business Administration, the US Department of Commerce and Illinois' Small Business Development Center's network of 11 International Trade Centers that are located throughout the state, and the Illinois Department of Agriculture. Illinois ranks in the top ten in

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terms of the amount of STEP funds awarded by state.

Building on his commitment to increase foreign trade and market Illinois goods overseas, this week Governor Quinn led a delegation of officials from Illinois businesses, educational institutions, and state and local governments on an economic trade mission in Brazil. The mission included stops in São Paulo, Brasilia and Recife, where Governor Quinn presided over the signing of several memorandums of understanding as part of the Doing Business with Illinois program, which is designed to establish global ties in manufacturing, agriculture, biotechnology and education.

Illinois is the fifth largest exporting state in the U.S., with exports totaling over \$64.8 billion in 2011. Illinois increased exports by nearly 30 percent over 2010, adding an additional \$14.8 billion. Illinois ranks first in the Midwest for exports and foreign direct investment.

For more information on Illinois trade opportunities, visit DCEO's trade site at exports.illinois.gov

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