

# Illinois Shines Program Update 2023

## *from Energy Solutions*

Energy Solutions is privileged to serve as the Illinois Shines Program Administrator (PA) and help realize Illinois' significant goals to build an equitable, clean energy future. With the conclusion of Program Year 2022-2023 and the launch of Program Year 2023-2024, we want to share some important messages and updates, acknowledge challenges Program participants have experienced, share improvement plans, and reinforce our vision for Program Administration. In addition to ongoing Program communications, the Program Administrator will provide regular State of the Program updates to stakeholders to address concerns, challenges, solutions and progress.

On July 1, 2022, Energy Solutions became the Program Administrator for Illinois Shines, overseen by the Illinois Power Agency, following a brief transition from the prior Administrator. Key Program Year 2022-2023 activities included:

### **Program Portal Rebuild**

Rebuilt the portal and Program infrastructure, including transfer of legacy data and adding quality controls, to support Program participants and their applications, and restoration of priority website reporting.

### **Approved Vendors and Designee Support**

Enhanced sector-specific and individualized support to Approved Vendors and Designees, including 1:1 meetings, Approved Vendor Roundtables, regular office hours, educational webinars, improved communications, and more.

### **Program Transitions**

With Approved Vendors and Designees, navigated through workaround and off-portal processes accompanying the transition to the new Program Administrator.

### **New Program Requirements**

Met expanded CEJA and 2022 Long-Term Plan commitments (three new project Program categories, new Traditional Community Solar and Community-Driven Community Solar scoring systems for project selection, roll out of the Equity Accountability System, including the inaugural year for the Minimum Equity Standard, enhanced consumer protection support, and more).

### **Challenges, Solutions, and Continued Commitments**

In 2022, the transition to a new Program Administrator resulted in significant challenges and delays for Program participants in submitting, reviewing, and processing applications, which had tangible impacts on their business operations. Energy Solutions acknowledges responsibility for these difficulties and apologizes for them. We have taken aggressive and impactful measures to address the key Program challenges, exceed the expectations of Program participants, and restore their full confidence. Starting in January 2023, we have aggressively implemented substantial enhancements in the following areas to meet the key Program challenges.

## Challenge: Application Processing

Approved Vendors and Designees expect timely project application submission, review, and approval. These activities are essential to facilitate the development and energization of projects, as well as the subsequent invoicing and REC payments associated with those projects. However, a substantial backlog of project applications, a 60-day Program pause, new activities to facilitate project category expansion through CEJA, the necessity for significant portal development to enable and improve application submission and processing, and the establishment of the necessary team to support these activities all combined to cause significant delays in processing project applications across various project categories and application types.

## Solutions:

- Energy Solutions increased staff and improved technical solutions to accelerate application review, meet current needs, and address the application backlog.
- On March 17, the Program Administrator detailed aggressive application processing plans and a commitment to eliminate the full Part I and Part II backlog by early May. We have provided weekly Application Processing Progress updates at the Program website, with detailed updates and expanded data to help stakeholders better track our progress and their project applications. Since April, we have met or exceeded the forecasted application review volumes week over week, and as of June 11, achieved a two-week turnaround time on initial application reviews of Small and Large DG (Part I and Part II), sooner than our initial end of Summer 2023 commitment. We have established regular staffing and volume reviews to ensure this timeline remains satisfactory. In May, we aggressively adjusted staff and processes to address issues in the Need Info arena, as shared in our announcements, and we continue focus there. Additional Quality Assurance has been established to review applications in all pre-verified status to identify and address issues.

## Challenge: Portal functionality

Due to the rapid development of a new portal it was necessary to phase in functionality. However, delays, bugs, and limitations in the portal hindered the generation and submission of Disclosure Forms. Furthermore, the absence of API tools and technical issues caused delays in fully verifying Part II applications, along with other challenges, resulting in slowed application submission and processing for Program Year 2022-2023. Program participants faced time-consuming manual processes in certain areas. In addition to the reliability of the portal, participants are seeking visibility into the portal development roadmap, including information on release timing, the status of known issues and fixes, and details about future or restored features.

## Solutions:

- In January, we optimized alignment of our portal team and developers across major focus areas of features, fixes, and utilities.
- From January through April 2023, we effectively used nightly portal maintenance to drive more rapid portal improvement and remediations, and we continue to use designated windows each week for software maintenance and releases.
- We are leveraging Working Groups of internal and external stakeholders to gather requirements and support beta testing including the recently-deployed Community Solar Disclosure Form API group, and solicited vendor feedback in our AV Roundtables between March and May 2023, which included Program and IT leadership.
- We added a portal roadmap to the Program website in Q3 2023, including details on critical features and fixes.



## Challenge: Support

Participants have lacked sufficient support or responsiveness from the Program Administrator team.

### Solutions:

- We've increased Support staff, and enhanced training, workflows, and our client relationship management tool, as we work to achieve a response time of under 48 hours for inbound inquiries. In March and April, we added a skilled team of four Support staff who are increasingly able to address vendor and customer inquiries directly. Where supplemental support is needed, an updated support routing system to leverage other team experts is in place.
- In March and April, we added a skilled team of four Support staff who are increasingly able to address vendor and customer inquiries directly, and the Support team is now 100% in-house to ensure swift and accurate responses.

## Challenge: Reporting and Communications

Participants have not had consistent, timely access to all project-related reporting, or in some cases sufficient communications, which is important for solar project planning, development, customer communications, financing, and permitting.

### Solutions:

- In May we restored both a dynamic Block Capacity Dashboard and an enhanced version of the Project Map on the Program website for stakeholder use. We are developing a report dashboard to provide aggregate Program data, to be available at a glance for interested stakeholders.
- AV feedback in Roundtables, office hours, and other forums has supported the development of Market Assessment Reports. We are synthesizing information with the Agency and in June 2023 plan to publish our first Market Insights reports for stakeholder benefits.
- The new [www.IllinoisShines.com](http://www.IllinoisShines.com) site launched, with re-organized and optimized content to support stakeholders and customers, and with exciting new enhancements and materials on the way.



## Program Vision

In addition to exceeding participant expectations of the Program Administrator, we aim to reinforce our Program vision, leadership, and experience to ensure the continued success and advancement of Illinois Shines. A key aspect of this is restoring confidence in the Program's ability to swiftly process solar project applications. While the Program's transition period has witnessed some successes through collaboration between stakeholders, the IPA, and Energy Solutions, we recognize that application processing is of utmost importance to participating entities. We are fully prepared and committed to fulfilling our promise of maintaining an average turnaround time of two weeks for application reviews going forward.

To support the dynamic Illinois solar market, the Energy Solutions team is dedicated to rapidly improving and enhancing the experience of Program participants by delivering:

- Rapid application review and processing, including continued communication and visibility on our commitments.
- A robust and high-functioning Program portal, reporting tools, and user interface, and transparency on portal development including key features, enhancements, remediations and utilities that participants require.
- Improved participant support, communication, reporting tools, and forums for sharing feedback, concerns, and suggestions.
- Market development support including community outreach, public-facing Program promotion, sector-specific market insights, roundtables and other forums, the launch of an EEC Mentorship program, and more.
- Continued enhancement of customer support and consumer protections including support for stranded customers and ongoing dialog in the Consumer Protection Working Group.

Energy Solutions sincerely regrets the challenges Program participants have encountered, including prolonged application processing times and other frustrations. We acknowledge the impact of these difficulties and sincerely apologize for any inconvenience caused.

Based on the recent changes and enhancements that have been implemented, as well as those planned for the near future, we are prepared to regain trust in the Program's capacity to promptly process project applications. Energy Solutions is committed to the success of Illinois Shines, working hand in hand with Approved Vendors and Designees, consumers, and other stakeholders. We sincerely thank you for your patience and understanding throughout this process.

Thank you for your support,  
***The Energy Solutions Team***

