

# Illinois Shines Program Update 2024

## from Energy Solutions

Energy Solutions rigorously approaches its responsibilities as the Illinois Shines Program Administrator to help realize Illinois' goals in building an equitable, clean energy future. This *State of the Program* update, which follows an inaugural version published in August 2023 and accompanying the *Program Year 2022-23 End of Year Report*, includes important messages and updates regarding Program objectives, feedback from stakeholders, solutions achieved or in development, and updates on Program vision.

In Program Year 2023-24, the Program continues making important progress to support stakeholders in developing new solar projects in Illinois. Progress includes:

### Project and Vendor Participation

The Program continues supporting a high volume of projects in all categories, with a majority of the Program Year's capacity already allocated, and processing renewals and new enrollments of Approved Vendors, Equity Eligible Contractors, and Designees.

### Equity and Consumer Protection Goals

Program Year 2023-24 has included the successful launch of the Minimum Equity Standards, the Mentorship Pilot Program, refinement of Advance of Capital criteria for Equity Eligible Contractors, rigorous enforcement of Consumer Protection requirements, and more.

### Portal Development

Feature development and troubleshooting has continued on the Program portal used by AVs and Designees, and on a buildout of streamlined access to documentation supporting the role of Illinois utilities.

### Stakeholder Forums and Feedback

Program Year 2023-24 continued AV Roundtables, saw deployment of both AV/Designee and Customer Satisfaction surveys, the hosting of stakeholder working groups, and various industry and public presentations. AVs report that the Program's regular office hours conducted by Sector Strategists provide timely answers to questions on process and policy.

### Support and Communication

The Program has improved the Contact Center support available to stakeholders via both phone call and email response, and maintains responsiveness to legislative, trade group, and media inquiries and requests for information. A new Program website, vendor and customer resource tools, and other materials have consistently been expanded.

### Needs/Requests, Solutions, and Continued Commitments

Energy Solutions has continued prioritizing Program improvements, building upon the progress and course-correction implemented in Program year 2022-23 including further portal development and maintenance, and enhanced operational, strategic, and technical support and resources for stakeholders. The Program continues to solicit, evaluate, and address stakeholder challenges and requests, and in this update, addresses the following areas:

## Needs/Requests: Application Processing

Reflecting increased participation, the Program has received high volumes of project applications. While the significant application processing backlog stakeholders experienced in Program Year 2022-23 has been resolved, as high volumes of project applications continue, the Program is in some cases processing applications outside of expected time frames, leading stakeholders to experience delays in project approvals and incentives.

## Solutions

- When experiencing peaks in application submission volumes, the Program communicates review volumes and timeline expectations via updates on the Program website.
- Energy Solutions continues evaluating application team resources, training, and processes, including additional staffing, and cross training of processing staff across Part I applications, Part II applications, and *Need Info* requests for greater productivity. Other process improvements, automated follow ups, and analyses of application submission and review data are being used to better inform our processing models and approaches.
- To reduce delays resulting from incomplete project applications and resulting in Need Info requests, application field validations (e.g., providing required data in required formats) have been added to the portal, and Program announcements feature [Application Tips and Tricks](#) to highlight common areas of confusion, omission, or error that can result in incomplete applications.
- The Program instituted protocols for cases in which Approved Vendors have become non-responsive to requests, allowing the Program Administrator to resume focus on other project applications.

## Needs/Requests: Portal Functionality

- The Program Administrator encourages and receives requests for portal features, functionality, and fixes from participating Approved Vendors and Designees through a variety of feedback forums. Stakeholders have requested administrative features for Designee management, ability to view and re-batch applications, Disclosure Form APIs, and other portal functionality.
- The Program provides a portal specifically for utilities to review and verify required vendor and project information, and the Program Administrator has continued to gather requirements from utilities to inform development.

## Solutions

- Portal development to meet stakeholder needs has continued, including application and administrative improvements and features (e.g., field validations, and help text), Disclosure Form tools (ability to Archive and Copy Disclosure Forms and API tools for both Distributed Generation and Community Solar Disclosure Forms), and other administrative views and features to manage project applications.
- Energy Solutions is evaluating a number of features including a series of batch process improvements, ability to add and remove Designees, improvements to the project application dashboard, and more.
- The Program Administrator meets regularly with utilities to capture requirements for the utility portal and prioritizes development requests with the Agency. The Program Administrator has built utility access to a suite of reports including *Schedule A & B, Batches, Contracts & documents, Quarterly Netting Statements, Collateral Amounts, Scheduled Energization Date, and Ability to Generate Project Removal Notices*. Work in progress includes access to Illinois Solar for All contract documents, a bulk document download tool, Quarterly Netting Statement enhancements (for 20-year contracts), a User Guide, and other enhancements.
- To prepare for features and functionality necessary to fulfill 2024 Long-Term Renewable Resources Procurement Plan requirements, the Program Administrator is developing timelines for the utility portal to support bulk document download for ICC meetings, document bulk download for *Schedule B, Illinois Solar for All Schedule A & Bs, a Project Details Drilldown Report, and a REC Delivery Report*.



## Needs/Requests: Sector Strategy

- Participating Approved Vendors across the Program's various project categories seek continuous support for the successful submission of project applications across project categories. New Approved Vendors and Designees seek support in understanding Program requirements during the onboarding process.
- Approved Vendors have requested assistance in better collaborating with Equity Eligible Contractors and connecting with Equity Eligible Persons, in support of the Program's Equity Accountability System objectives, including the Minimum Equity Standards.

## Solutions:

- The Program Administrator's Sector Strategy team supports participating entities across all project categories and convenes a variety of forums to solicit feedback and support requests, including 1:1 meetings, AV Roundtables, the Mentorship Pilot Program, the AV/Designee Satisfaction Survey, working groups, and weekly office hours, as well as maintaining dialog with solar trade groups. The team responds to thousands of individual Approved Vendor and Designee emails and calls in support of projects and applications.
- The Sector Strategy team has supplemented its new AV onboarding process and support of existing vendors with video learning resources, downloadable help guides, training sessions, and linkage to updated digital resources.
- In support of Equity Eligible Contractors, the Program launched an 8-week Mentorship Pilot Program in October 2023, supporting Program familiarity and success for participating EEC entities.
- The Program Administrator and the Agency have continued coordinating to support various public and community presentations in support of vendor participation and workforce development efforts of Equity Eligible Persons, to align with CEJA's equity goals and the Minimum Equity Standard.

## Needs/Requests: Program Communications

- Program announcements continue to be lengthy, reflecting the Program's continued growth and need to share high volumes of information, requirements, updates, key dates, and opportunities relating to all participating entities as well as information unique to specific project categories.
- With its growth, the Program receives continued interest from legislators and media members on solar project development through Illinois Shines.

## Solutions:

- The Program has reformatted weekly Program announcements to improve utility for stakeholders, including adding new sections, informational labels, and directing stakeholders to relevant locations of the Program website.
- The Program supports the IPA's *Power Pulse!* and *Power Brief* communications serving legislators and constituents and is evaluating new communication platforms geared toward prospective and existing Illinois Shines customers. The Program supports increasing numbers of media inquiries.
- The new [www.IllinoisShines.com](http://www.IllinoisShines.com) website combined and improved information previously shared at the Program's two public websites and prioritizes education and accessibility for prospective and existing customers, solar developers, and other interested stakeholders, through dynamic content and consistently updated information.



## Needs/Requests: Contact Center Support

Stakeholders have requested improvements to inbound support provided by the Program’s Contact Center, including improved case resolution and response speed.

## Solutions:

The Contact Center has continued focus on enhancing and increasing staff training to deliver improved first-level support, and improved case routing and escalations to appropriate subject matter experts where second-tier support is needed. The Contact Center continues building out training guides and knowledge tools to improve quality and speed of responses, and has implemented a quality assurance program to review calls and cases.

## Needs/Requests: Consumer Protection

- Customers seek greater visibility on the status of their Distributed Generation project applications, from energization to Part II approval that precedes distribution of incentives.
- In cases where a customer’s Approved Vendor and/or Designee is unable or unwilling to complete the solar project installation and/or submit a project application to the Illinois Shines program, customers can become “stranded” and may require assistance.

## Solutions:

- In November, the Program website restored a [Project Look Up Tool](#) for customers with Distributed Generation (on-site) Illinois Shines projects to view the status of their project application.
- The Program launched the [Help for Stranded Customers](#) initiative to support customers whose Approved Vendor and/or Designee has gone out of business or ceased/limited operations, is unable to meet Program requirements, or is suspended due to disciplinary action and prohibited from advancing projects through the application process.
- The Illinois Commerce Commission approved the IPA’s proposals, via the 2024 Long-Term Renewable Resources Procurement Plan: the institution of escrow processes to hold and ensure distribution of REC incentives issued by utilities; a restitution program to support customers who have incurred a monetary loss as a result of being stranded; and an incentive model for Approved Vendors and Designees taking on stranded customers. These expansions of customer protections will be developed over the coming months.



## Program Vision

In the August 2023 State of the Program message, the Program Administrator shared its commitment to meeting Program expectations on project application processing, portal development, high-quality support of and responsiveness to stakeholders, and providing other tools, resources, reports, and efforts to supporting stakeholders in developing solar projects through Illinois Shines, as well as meeting the significant consumer protection and equity dimensions of the Program. The Program Administrator has made continuous improvement in these and other areas, and Energy Solutions’ Program vision includes the achievement of many more milestones toward meeting Illinois’ clean energy goals.

Working closely with Approved Vendors and Designees, consumers, trade groups, utilities, community organizations, and other stakeholders, the Program vision is to facilitate the accurate and timely review and approval of solar projects in Illinois Shines, expanding participation and access to the Program for all vendors including Equity Eligible Contractors and Equity Eligible Persons. As the Program continues to institute critical but reasonable consumer protection safeguards and otherwise ensure the integrity and equity of Program benefits the Program Administrator will develop additional resources and tools to support project development.

Thank you for your support,

*The Energy Solutions Team*