

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 the most recent version published in March 2024 and the Program Year 2023-2024 End of Year Report, includes important messages and updates regarding Program objectives, solutions achieved or in development, feedback from stakeholders, and updates on Program vision.

In Program Year 2024–25, the Program continues to provide support for stakeholders to develop new solar projects in Illinois and fulfill the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act's objectives. Progress includes:

Project and Vendor Participation

Program participation remains steady, with a high volume of project applications in all categories in addition to renewals and new enrollments of Approved Vendors, Equity Eligible Contractors, Designees, and entities enrolling in the new EEC Subcontractor Category.

Equity and Consumer Protection Goals

Program Year 2024–25 continues progress of the Minimum Equity Standard, expands the Mentorship Program and invites EEC Subcontractor participation, with rigorous enforcement of Consumer Protection requirements and the planning of important new Consumer Protection initiatives.

Portal Development

Feature development, enhancements, and troubleshooting continues on the Program's application portal, including preparation for upcoming Illinois Net Metering changes, and buildout of the Utility portal.

Stakeholder Forums and Feedback

Program Year 2024–25 includes the continuation of AV Roundtables, the return of both AV/Designee and Customer Satisfaction surveys, the hosting of stakeholder working groups, and various industry and public presentations. Weekly office hours and 1:1 vendor appointments hosted by Sector Strategists, and the development of additional technical help guides, will provide added stakeholder support and timely response to process and policy questions. Stakeholder feedback requests are being issued on multiple, critical topics.

Support and Communication

The Program continues refining phone and email Contact Center support for stakeholders, and remains responsive to legislative, trade group, and media inquiries and requests for information about Illinois Shines. The Program continues identifying opportunities for helpful resources and communications for stakeholders.

Needs/Requests, Solutions, and Continued Commitments

Energy Solutions continues prioritizing new Program improvements, including enhanced operational, strategic, and technical support as well as resources for stakeholders, and further portal development. The Program continues to solicit, evaluate, and address stakeholder input, challenges and requests, and in this update, addresses the following areas:

Needs/Requests: Application Processing

Illinois Shines continues to see strong participation demonstrated by submission of high volumes of project applications, including an appreciable volume of incomplete applications whose review can be delayed by a *Need Info* request to resolve discrepancies or gaps. In addition, high demand in Group A continued to exhaust capacity more quickly than for Group B in Program Year 2023-24, creating a significant waitlist for newly available capacity to begin in Program Year 2024-25. Combined with the demand for refreshed capacity, the waitlist volume resulted in the Program processing some applications outside of targeted time frames, leading stakeholders to experience delays in project approvals and ability to invoice incentives.

Solutions

- To address the large volume of waitlisted Part I applications awaiting Program Year 2024-25 capacity, the Program Administrator preliminarily began application review prior to the June 3, 2024 Program Year open. By the end of September 2024, the backlog of several thousand waitlisted applications was resolved, and the Program Administrator was within expected application processing turnaround times for all categories but Small DG Part II. Processing for Small DG Part II applications continues to be prioritized and is expected to be within the 10 day processing turnaround time by the end of November 2024.
 - When experiencing peaks in application submission volumes, the Program communicates review volumes and review expectations.
- To highlight common areas of confusion, omission, or error in project applications that can delay review and approval, the Program continues to share [Application Tips and Tricks](#) in weekly Market Announcements, and recently developed a [Distributed Generation Project Application Checklist](#) and a sample, annotated [Part I Traditional Community Solar application](#).
- Since the Program's launch, the Group A Small and Large Distributed Generation categories have exhausted each year's available capacity more quickly than for Group B. To fulfill the IPA Act's requirement that Illinois Shines be generally designed to provide for the steady, predictable, and sustainable growth of solar projects in Illinois, the Agency undertook several steps in the 2024 Long-Term Plan to remedy unsteadiness and unpredictability of block capacity usage, including but not limited to eliminating the distinction between Group A and Group B for the Small and Large DG blocks.
- Energy Solutions continues evaluating application team resources, staffing, training, and processes, across Part I applications, Part II applications, and *Need Info* requests for greater productivity. The team also analyzes processing data to identify and implement other process improvements and automation opportunities to better inform our processing models and approaches.



Needs/Requests: Consumer Support and Protection

In a small proportion of cases, Illinois Shines customers have been harmed by Approved Vendors (or their Designees) who are unable or unwilling to complete or maintain contracted projects, or by Approved Vendors who fail to pass through promised incentives in a timely manner, or at all. Despite thorough vetting of Approved Vendors and a rigorous disciplinary process, the Program cannot anticipate cases in which Approved Vendors or their Designees may fail to meet their Program requirements, nor can it prevent the resulting harm to customers. As Program participation grows and REC contracted projects age, the volume of customer issues and complaints have increased, compelling the Program to consider solutions that best address them. The Program's stranded customer efforts and new initiatives outlined in the 2024 Long-Term Plan are designed to add further consumer protections in several key areas.

Solutions:

- The Program continues its [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.
- To further support customers experiencing difficulty or harm in the completion of their project or in receiving an expected incentive, the Agency outlined three initiatives in the 2024 Long-Term Plan which are being developed for the Program:
 1. A REC adder, an increased price in the REC Contract for RECs generated by projects that were stranded and then "unstranded" by AVs and Designees who assisted stranded customers;
 2. An escrow process enabling the Program Administrator to direct utilities to make REC payment to a third-party entity (hired by the Program), where the Program determines there is a high likelihood that the AV would not pass through promised REC incentive payments to customers;
 3. A solar restitution program to provide economic assistance to customers who have been harmed through their participation in Illinois Shines or Illinois Solar for All, including by bad actors, and where there is no reasonable likelihood of the AV or Designee making the customer whole.
- To date in Program Year 2024-25, the Program has solicited input through the Consumer Protection Working Group and calls for stakeholder feedback, and the Agency and Program are reviewing and considering feedback toward developing these processes. Information on next steps and rollout timelines will be forthcoming and shared at the [Consumer Protection Initiatives page](#).
- In August the IPA published a [Credits and Rebates for Installing Solar factsheet](#) to help differentiate some of the various economic incentives that may be available to customers.



Needs/Requests: Sector Strategy

A growing roster of participating AVs and Designees across the Program's project categories require continuous support for successful and compliant Program participation and project application submission. These entities, as well as other interested stakeholder groups, request varied individual and group forums, support, and feedback channels.

Solutions:

- The Program Administrator's Sector Strategy team supports participating entities across all project categories with 1:1 meetings, AV Roundtables, the Mentorship Program, the AV/Designee Satisfaction Survey, working groups, and weekly office hours and other forums to solicit feedback and support requests.
 - Already this Program Year, the team has held 160 1:1 appointments with AVs, fielded more than 6,000 emails and phone calls, held office hours each week and made more than 65 post-session follow ups, in support of projects and applications and maintains dialog with solar trade groups and community organizations.
- The team has supplemented its New AV Onboarding process and support of existing vendors with video learning resources, downloadable help guides and online tools, and training sessions. Recently developed resources, coordinated with the Program's Operations team, include a [Distributed Generation Project Application Checklist](#), a [Traditional Community Solar sample project application](#), a [Prevailing Wage Requirements](#), [Acceptable Formats for Part II CoC/PTO Documents](#), publication of [Mentorship Pilot Program materials](#), updates to Frequently Asked Questions, and more. To grow participation in the Public Schools category, the Agency and Program continue to present to state education administrators and school boards via webinars, meetings, and conference presentations, to conduct community and stakeholder outreach, and to plan other measures including public schools project workshops and case studies.
- In support of the Equity Accountability System, the Agency:
 - Continues to add features and functionality to the Energy Workforce Equity Portal to encourage and facilitate registration of Equity Eligible Persons and posting of job opportunities by solar vendors.
 - Published [Part 1 of its Equity Accountability System Assessment](#), an IPA-authored report assessing the effectiveness of statutory Equity Accountability System Assessment provisions in promoting equity across the clean energy economy. Part 2 of the Assessment will be published later in 2024.

The Agency and Program continue to:

- Make public outreach and presentations to community groups to share Illinois Shines project and workforce opportunities with interested communities, solar vendors, prospective solar employees, and more.
- Review Minimum Equity Standard 2023-24 Year-End Reports, and present and provide educational materials and support to participating entities toward their successful and compliant achievement of MES objectives.
- Following the successful Mentorship Pilot Program in 2023, the Program has opened registration for the 2024-25 Program Year Mentorship Program. The Mentorship Program provides mentees with training and presentations on Illinois Shines processes and requirements. Approved Vendors and Designees certified as Equity Eligible Contractors and/or minority-owned, woman-owned, veteran-owned, disability-owned, or are considered small businesses are encouraged to apply to be mentees late in 2024, and the Program also seeks experienced AVs and Designees willing to share insights on Program and solar industry topics with mentees to serve as mentors. The 2024-25 Program will commence in January 2025, and will include Zoom trainings, pre-recorded materials, and an in-person networking event.
- The 2024 Long-Term Plan provided for the establishment of a certification process for EEC Subcontractors - businesses that qualify as an Equity Eligible Contractor and seek to participate in the Program but do not yet have a relationship with an Approved Vendor and/or do not have a customer-facing role for projects submitted to the Program. Registered EEC Subcontractors will be listed on the Program website and the Agency's Energy Workforce Equity Portal and must work with an Approved Vendor or registered Designee to participate in the Program. Since Program Year 2024-25 opened, the Program has been registering EEC Subcontractors, and will continue to provide support for these entities.



Needs/Requests: Portal Functionality

- Through a variety of feedback forums, the Program encourages, receives, and evaluates requests for portal features and functionality from participating AVs and Designees, and implements updates to accommodate changes required by the 2024 Long-Term Plan.

Solutions

- Recent Program portal development has included enhancements to Disclosure Form PDFs and CSV uploads, new application field questions required by the 2024-Long-Term Plan, and improvements to password management.
- Forthcoming updates include changes to Disclosure Forms necessitated by updates to Net Metering, Program Administrator ability to update project application statuses as Withdrawn, Removed, and Not Executed, Program Administrator ability to remove associations between AVs and Designees when the working relationship has terminated, support of the Distributed Generation API, and more.
- A [portal updates blog](#) and Program announcements note market-facing portal updates. The Program has implemented a variety of Utility portal updates and reporting capabilities to fulfill 2024 Long-Term Renewable Resources Procurement Plan requirements and will soon publish a *Utility Portal User's Guide* to support utilities in using the portal.

Needs/Requests: Program Communications

- The Agency frequently receives requests from legislators, media, and stakeholder groups to report on progress against the state's Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS).
- The Program seeks to balance the need to share high volumes of information, requirements, updates, key dates, and opportunities with announcement length and frequency considerations.
- The Program seeks to ensure prospective and current customers are adequately informed and educated about going solar in Illinois through Illinois Shines, including understanding processes, how to evaluate participating vendors, and questions to ask of prospective solar vendors.

Solutions:

- In October, the Agency announced the Phase I launch of the [Illinois Clean Energy Dashboard](#), a data website for residents, businesses, and other stakeholders, designed to track the progress and impact of renewable energy development across Illinois. By presenting complex metrics through intuitive data visualizations, the Dashboard allows interested parties to view key trends in renewable energy generation and geographical energy capacities, and to quickly answer common questions about the growth of renewable energy in Illinois. In addition, the Illinois Shines Program is evaluating opportunities to enhance Program data reporting on the Program website.
- The Program continually monitors stakeholder feedback and evaluates the [illinoisshines.com](#) content and interface, adjusting to best relay updates and information clearly and most accessibly. The [Block Capacity Dashboard](#) has been revised to not only illustrate the current allocations by category, but also provide revised visualizations of allocations by sub-category, and enhancements to improve the overall site experience, including foreign language translation toggles, new usability features, updates to content, and more are planned.
- The Program is examining opportunities to further strengthen weekly Program announcements and is evaluating new communication platforms geared toward prospective and existing Illinois Shines customers. A new consumer oriented handbook, *Going Solar with Illinois Shines*, will soon be published.

Program Vision

Illinois Shines continues to make progress toward fulfilling the requirements of the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act. Updates to the Long-Term Renewable Resources Procurement Plan and resulting Program materials are helping to ensure the development of new DG and CS projects across Illinois, with emphasis on key equity provisions and consumer protections. The popularity of solar development in Illinois and the growth of Program participation have necessitated new initiatives, processes, and safety nets to ensure successful experiences for customers, participating vendors, and all stakeholders, and to scale support and automation to meet demand.

The Program remains committed to meeting expectations for project application processing, portal development, the provision of necessary tools, resources, and reports to participations, and delivery of high-quality, responsive support and information to stakeholders. In Program Year 2024-25, the Program also seeks strategic new opportunities to expand Illinois Shines outreach and participation, to fill project categories, support equity workforce participation, and continue educating consumers, while also delivering critical new initiatives for the benefit of all stakeholders.

Thank you for your support,

The Energy Solutions Team

