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# Illinois Film Offices Attract With Plenty of Perks

From Chicago to the west and south, state offers easy shooting access and incentives

• By Paula Hendrickson



Adrian S. Burrows Sr./NBC

↑ "Chicago Fire," which lenses in the Windy City, is among the many series that have found a home in Illinois.

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**Illinois** is no stranger to the film industry. Essanay Studios, founded in Chicago in 1907, is where silent film stars including Wallace Beery, Gloria Swanson, and Charlie Chaplin made some of their earliest films.

Although filmmakers soon flocked to Hollywood, with its robust advertising industry, Chicago became — and continues to be — a hot spot for making commercials.

Today, TV productions are on the rise with shows including “The Chi,” “The Bear,” “South Side” and others joining Dick Wolf’s “Chicago Fire,” “Chicago P.D.” and “Chicago Med.” Many Windy City-based series are shot in the nation’s second-largest soundstage, Cinespace Chicago.

“Illinois has long been a thriving arts hub, with iconic movies filmed right here including ‘The Blues Brothers,’ ‘Home Alone’ and of course, ‘Ferris Bueller’s Day



“The Chi,” with Birgundi Baker, Jacob Latimore, Hannah Hall and Iman Shupert, is set in Chicago.

Off,” says Gov. J.B. Pritzker. “This is why in 2022, the \$700 million production revenue in our state shattered records and eclipsed our pre-pandemic revenue numbers. I attribute this success to our expanded film production tax credit as well as our diversity, inclusivity and commitment to equity; we’re ensuring our state is a welcoming place where every production wants to film.”

According to the Illinois Film Office, in 2022 the state’s film and television production revenue was \$110 million more than 2019’s pre-pandemic high.

“Looking at production spend, in 2017, 70% of the spend was in television,” says Christine Dudley, executive director, Illinois Production Alliance (IPA), a trade association that lobbies the state legislature and collaborates with business and trade unions in support of the film and television industry. “In 2019

it rose to 83%. By 2021 it was 86%. Commercial ads have remained stable, maintaining about 12%-15% of the overall spend.”

The IPA, which also translates industry terms for government workers, and vice versa, played a key role in pushing through recent expansions and extensions of Illinois’ Film Production Tax Credit.

In 2022, the 30% tax credit for qualified expenditures on pro-

duction spending and salaries — plus an additional 15% on salaries for people living in disadvantaged areas — was expanded to include a limited number of out-of-state residents’ wages for production work performed in Illinois.

“A percentage of the tax credit funds a pool for ongoing film workforce training programs,” says Peter Hawley, deputy director, Illinois Film Office.

“Part of the legislation says those funds cannot be swept,” Dudley adds. “They’re only for the purpose of training programs for the film and television industry.”

In 2022, the new Film and TV Workforce Training Program served approximately 175 students at seven locations around the state; more than 70% of participants were people of color, and 80% landed paid production positions after completing the course.

“The goal, over a decade, is to train 2,500 to 3,000 people with a large number being women and minorities,” Hawley says. “This training program will show people who wouldn’t normally think about a career in the film and television business that there are great careers in the business that are high-paying union jobs — and they don’t have to leave the state.”

Earlier this year, Pritzker extended the tax credit for another decade, showing the industry that Illinois is in it for the long run. Dudley says getting state legislators to support the tax credit expansion and extension was easy since the previous credits “expanded the market triple-fold,” and set the stage to increase the state’s market share.



**The state is saying, ‘This is a good place. Come and make your film here with a tax credit. You can do it economically, and we have a lot of good locations.’ — Gary Camarano**

Blues Brothers The Fugitive Backdraft The Untouchables Transformers 3 Home Alone Road to Perdition Pretty in Pink  
 The Dark Knight Ordinary People Public Enemies Ferris Bueller's Day Off Early Edition Prison Break Boss The Bear  
 Empire Chicago Fire Shameless Chicago PD The Chi An Acceptable Loss Chicago Med South Side Somebody Somewhere  
 The Shining Girls Power Book IV: Force Fargo Station Eleven Candyman Widows Heist 88 Saturdays Dark  
 Matter Justified City Primeval Deli Boys Work in Progress Batman Blues Brothers The Fugitive Backdraft  
 The Untouchables Transformers 3 Home Alone Road to Perdition Pretty in Pink The Dark Knight Ordinary People  
 Public Enemies Ferris Bueller's Day Off Early Edition Prison Break Boss The Bear Empire Chicago Fire Shameless  
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“

**“We have everything you need. A world-class city, international airports, the lakefront. We have prairie and farmland. We’ve got the Mississippi River.” —Peter Hawley**

“In the last few years, other states have come online with competitive programs,” Dudley says. “Illinois didn’t want to lose out. They saw the need to revisit what we could do to capture more market share and stay current not only with neighboring and competitive states, but also with the fast-paced industry that’s been evolving with the explosion of streaming content.”

While the Illinois Film Office helps productions understand, manage and apply state tax credits, other film offices throughout the state help scout locations, find skilled labor and deal with logistics. For the Chicago Film Office, that means being a one-stop liai-

son between productions, city services and sister agencies.

“We provide tailored support for whatever a filmmaker at any level needs,” says Jonah Zeiger, director, Chicago Film Office. “If they need a permit to film on city property, streets and sidewalks, or if they’re interested in filming in a city building, they contact our office and we’ll guide them through the process so it’s really streamlined and expedited.”

Zeiger’s office assigns dedicated liaisons to long-term productions — including Apple TV+ series “Dark Matter” — to ensure consistency throughout the production. “We also have people focused on independent

→ HBO Max’s “South Side,” with Sultan Salahuddin and Kareme Young, is among series that like what Illinois offers.

↓ Jeremy Allen White stars in “The Bear,” which lenses in Illinois.



features, commercials, documentaries and student films,” he adds. Zeiger’s team can coordinate with police and fire departments, even obtain special permissions from sister agencies such as the Chicago Park District.

When it comes to permits, things are markedly different at the Quad Cities Film Office, which encompasses Rock Island, Moline, and East Moline in Illinois as well as Davenport and Bettendorf, Iowa, on the opposite side of the Mississippi River. You might assume dealing with multiple municipalities would make permitting harder, but it doesn’t.

“Historically, we’ve never had permits here,” says Doug Miller, film and media liaison to the Quad Cities Regional Film Office. “You bring in the fire chief, the police chief, city administrator and a risk management person, tell them what you’re doing, and you make sure you’ve got the right insurance. Big cities like Chicago have a lot more to deal with.”

While Miller says a more standardized process will likely one day be adopted, the goal is always to keep it as simple as possible. Having dealt with bureaucracy in both Iowa and Illinois, Miller says Illinois has one of the best tax credit systems in the country. “There are lots of checks and balances, which makes the tax credit very marketable,” Miller says.

Gary Camarano, executive director of the Northwest Illinois Film Office, which includes cities Rockford and Freeport, farmland, factories and the historic town of Galena, also likes to keep things streamlined.

“We’ll hook them up with locations, we’ll work with them to get the proper permitting and we make sure they know about the state incentives,” Camarano says, noting that HBO’s “Lovecraft Country” filmed in the area.

“We know the vendors, contractors and which hotels have good internet speed for your uploads and downloads,” says Camarano, who started the Northwest Illinois Film Office in 2017 based on what he’d learned by helping launch a film office in Las Cruces, N.M.

Additional film offices span the state, from the Rockford Film Office in the north to the Southern Illinois Film Office in the south, with the Central Illinois Film Commission and the Champaign County Film Office in central Illinois.

“There’s a very good film community in Champaign and Rantoul, which is a town right outside of Champaign,” Hawley says. “There’s a decommissioned Air Force base there that they’re using as a film studio for some independent productions. And Southern Illinois University has been a hotbed of film for decades.”



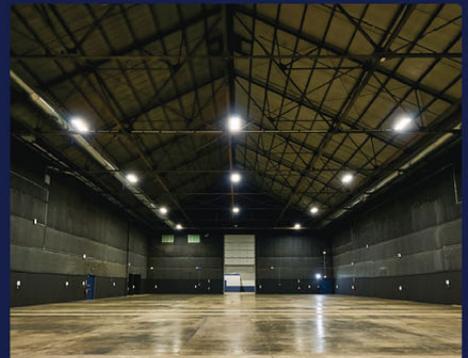


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When it comes to locations, Illinois offers plenty — even the World’s Largest Catsup Bottle in Collinsville. “We have everything you need. A world-class city, international airports, the lakefront. We have prairie and farmland. We’ve got the Mississippi River,” Hawley says.

It also has castles. When filmmaker Don Hatton, who grew up in Illinois and attended Northern Illinois University, was executive producing the horror film “The Blacklight” (2021), he knew exactly where to find the castle called for in the script.

“They used Stronghold Manor in Ogle County,” Camarano says. “It worked out very well for them. And there’s another castle-type structure in Carroll County.”

Yet at its core, Illinois is America’s heartland. In 1990, Italian

filmmaker Pupi Avanti came to the Quad Cities to make “Bix” (1991), a biopic about legendary jazzman and Quad Cities’ native Bix Beiderbecke. He’s returned to film in the area numerous times since.

“He likened us to the America of Frank Capra,” Miller says.

In 2019, the Farrelly brothers shot exteriors for their series “The Now” in and around the Quad Cities. Once Miller learned Bill Murray was in the show, he put two and two together: Murray has spent a lot of time in the area visiting family and likely suggested it.

“Somebody Somewhere,” which is a show I really love on HBO, based itself out of a far-western Chicago suburb — well outside of the 30-mile zone — and did all of the work outside of Chicago,” Hawley says, noting there’s a good deal of production going on

“

**We’re ensuring our state is a welcoming place where every production wants to film.”**  
—Gov. J.B. Pritzker

beyond Chicago. Still, Chicago’s state-of-the-art studios including Cinespace handle the bulk of Illinois-based productions.

“At least two major studio complexes are in the pipeline,” Zeiger says. “We recently did a groundbreaking for Regal Mile Studios on the South Side. It’s a very exciting initiative led by Derek Dudley and Susan Cronin of ID8 — they’re some of the producers behind “The Chi” on Showtime with Lena Waithe and Common as executive producers. It’s aiming to revitalize the community in the South Shore neighborhood and to create state-of-the-art studio spaces on the South Side.”

Regal Mile Studios will have its own workforce program dedicated to giving area residents an opportunity to be trained and mentored by seasoned professionals. “This is not small-scale DIY filmmaking,” Zeiger says. “This is

playing in the area that the major creators and producers are in.”

Christine Dudley believes the newly extended tax credit is critical to undertakings such as Regal Mile and the Fields Studio, which is planned for the city’s northwest side. “Smash Studios is also uniquely positioned for newer virtual technology,” she adds.

While downstate locations might not have cutting-edge studios, Miller sees one advantage Chicago can’t match: Affordability. “No offense to Chicago, but it’s cheaper here,” Miller says. “I like to use my Coors Light test. At the end of the day I can get a Coors Light for \$2.50 at any of the local bars here. What’s that beer going to cost in Chicago? The same is true for hotels and everything else. We offer an economic advantage on top of the tax credits.”

Adds Camarano: “The state is saying, ‘This is a good place. Come and make your film here with a tax credit. You can do it economically, and we have a lot of good locations.’”

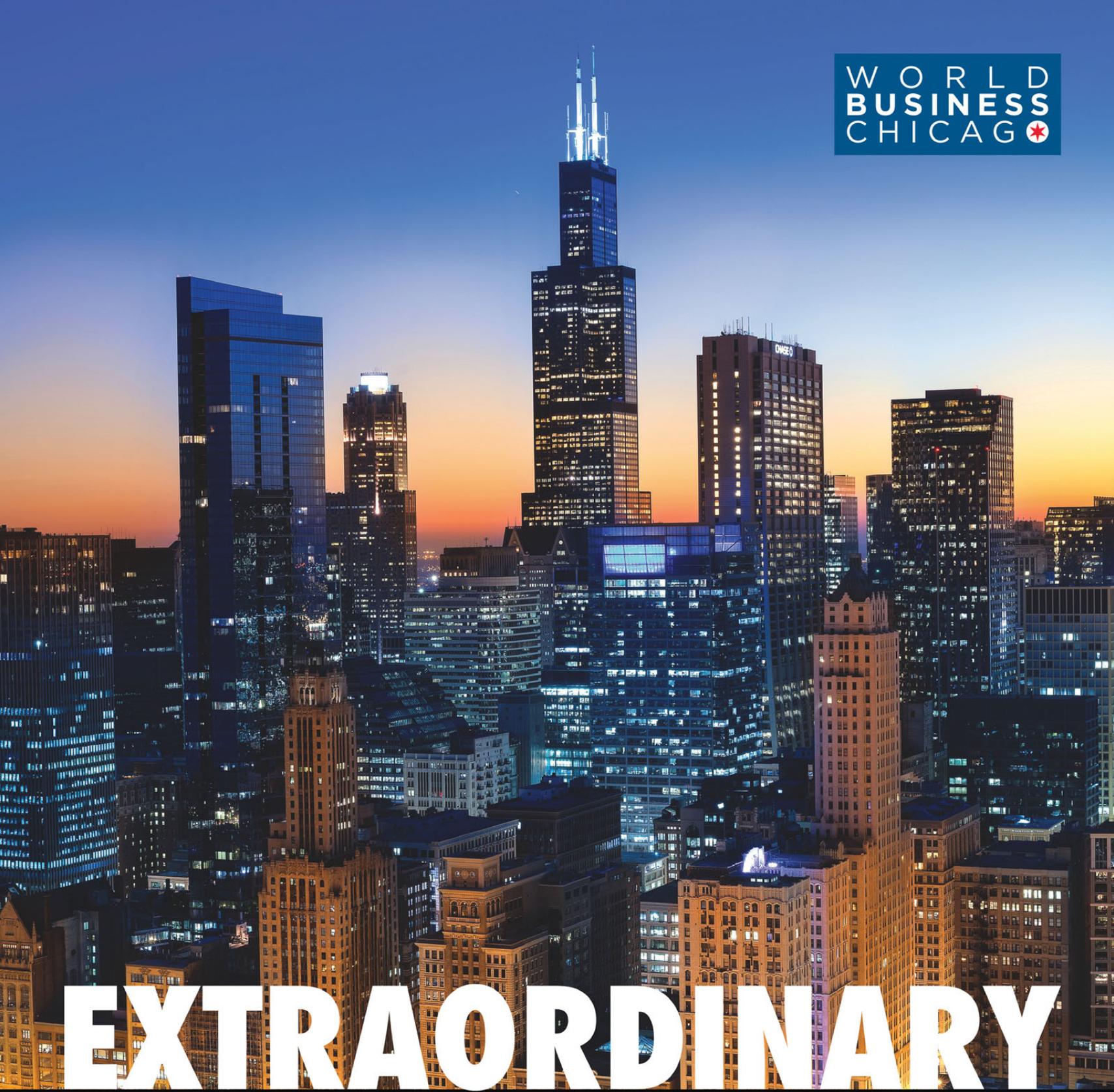
The industry knows Chicago has plenty of locations, talent and infrastructure. “We’re trying to amplify that and let the industry know our capacity has expanded and is expanding even more,” Zeiger says.

“In the last decade we’ve had so much success and growth,” Dudley says. “We’re building on the legacy that’s created a lot of tremendous television.”

Unlike other states, Hawley says Illinois’ film and television tax credits are uncapped. “Governor Pritzker has shown the industry that Illinois is open for business. I see us getting to a billion dollars a year very quickly.”

↓  
“The Blacklight” (below) liked Stronghold Manor for its horror setting; while “Somebody Somewhere” (bottom) was based in a far-western Chicago suburb.



A high-angle, wide shot of the Chicago skyline at dusk. The sky transitions from a deep blue at the top to a warm orange glow near the horizon. Numerous skyscrapers are illuminated with their interior lights, creating a vibrant, glowing cityscape. The Willis Tower is the most prominent structure in the center, with its distinctive spire. Other notable buildings include the Aon Center and the United Center. The foreground shows a dense cluster of older, multi-story buildings with classic architectural details.

# EXTRAORDINARY

Chicago's central location, diverse communities, and stunning architecture make it the ideal backdrop for your next film, TV, or digital media production. Our production ecosystem features top-ranked film, TV, and digital media studios, creative incubators, a highly skilled and diverse workforce, and a globally connected advertising agency network.

Chicago is more than a great location - it's a progressive region that proudly stands for diversity, equity, and inclusion. In Chicago, we value authenticity and collaboration, and prioritize engagement with communities of color and historically marginalized businesses to ensure that business reflects the richness and diversity that your investors, employees, and audience demand.

# The City Is the Star

Chicago plays itself in iconic films and TV shows • *By Zoe Hewitt*

**Maintaining the location library** of 20,000 photos is one of Illinois Film Office assistant deputy director Louis Ferrara's favorite parts of his job. "Producers always laugh when I say that, but it's true," he says.

The massive quantity of location photos are categorized into various curated files so when productions have a need, the film office can readily supply whatever they desire.

"We scout locations on a regular basis to freshen up the library," says Ferrara, noting that they also send letters to homeowners and businesses to help with

continually growing the resource. There's no time wasted when productions choose to film in Illinois, and no need to retread the same locations.

Of course, there's no better stand in for Chicago than, well, Chicago. The city's iconic sites have appeared in multiple shows as "themselves" over the years. The iconic elevated trains and platforms are in high use when the city stars as itself in productions, whether they're period or modern day shoots. "The [Chicago Transit Authority] has been historically extremely film friendly," Ferrara says.

Part of the state's appeal when it comes to filming is that there's something for everyone when it comes to architectural location styles, or both modern and historical time periods. There are prairies, lakes, rivers and wooded topography, in addition to Victorian and Georgian architecture — the state can stand in for almost any part of the Midwest.

The film office is a full-service agency, readily available to provide curated images to any production based on generalized descriptions of locations or more fleshed-out and developed ideas. In fact, the Illinois team will meet any combination of filmmakers to escort them on location scouts, ensuring the process is an effortless one for the out-of-towners.

While the state is most popular for production work from May to October, there's plenty of availability in the winter months, too. With a well-trained local film crew already used to navigating the weather, productions can be confident that they'll find what they need to fulfill creative needs as well as budgetary considerations. 📍



## JAMES R. THOMPSON CENTER

A post-modern building style with the well-known Monument With Standing Beast in front. The building is within the Loop district known for encompassing the iconic downtown skyline.

*Selected Production Use:*

"Station 11" • "Chicago P.D."  
"The Batman" • "Ferris Bueller's Day Off"



## METRO SOUTH MEDICAL CENTER

This former hospital is a recent addition to production locations available in the state with approximately 509,000 square-feet.

*Selected Production Use:*

"Justified: City Primeval" • "The Chi"  
"Power Book IV: Force" • "Work in Progress"



## CHICAGO TRANSIT AUTHORITY – L TRAINS / PLATFORMS

The city's elevated train system is not only important for local transportation, but also remains an iconic part of Chicago's skyline.

*Selected Production Use:*

"Station 11" • "The Exorcist"  
"Dark Matter" • "Risky Business"



## CHICAGO BOARD OF TRADE

A 45-story skyscraper in the Loop district is a prime example of Art Deco architecture.

*Selected Production Use:*

"The Batman" • "The Dark Knight"  
"Road to Perdition" • "Ferris Bueller's Day Off"



## UNION STATION

This West Loop-based building is a mix of beaux arts and Greek revival architecture.

*Selected Production Use:*

"Fargo" • "Chicago P.D." • "Shining Girls"  
"My Best Friend's Wedding" • "Man of Steel"



## THE GREEN MILL COCKTAIL LOUNGE

A bar and jazz lounge where patrons can sit in the booth where Al Capone and his gang did business.

*Selected Production Use:*

"Chicago P.D." • "Sense 8"  
"Dark Matter" • "High Fidelity"

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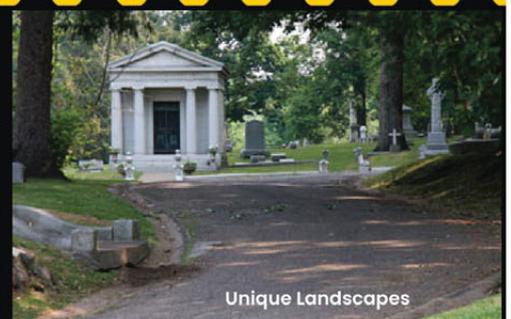
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# Tax Incentives, Diversity Initiatives Encourage Illinois Production

State works toward training talented crew for years to come • By Zoe Hewitt

**When it comes** to any entertainment industry production, whether it's a tentpole film or an independent commercial, creative choices must vie against the ever-important bottom line. Working in a state with tax incentive programs means productions can have the best of both worlds.

In Illinois, Gov. J.B. Pritzker just signed a 10-year extension for the state's film-friendly tax incentive program, which guarantees productions 30% back on eligible expenses through Jan. 1, 2033. The credit was recently expanded to include eligibility for nine key positions for non-residents: director, writer, DP, production designer, costume designer, production accountant, visual-effects supervisor, editor and composer.

Peter Hawley, deputy director of the Illinois Film Office, says applying for and receiving the incentives is an easy process with "plenty to go around" since there's no cap on the state's limits and how many productions may be approved.

"We're really set up to have production come in here and go to work right away," says Hawley, whose background as a former film professor and filmmaker give him a unique understanding of what productions need most.

The minimum budget for qualified projects under 30 minutes is \$50,000 and for over a half-hour it's \$100,000. While Hawley jokes that the application involves a lot of white space, the implication is clear: Illinois wants to make it as easy as possible for productions to come, have a good experience and return in the future.

The film commission understands the realities of timing and accommodates the needs of different types of productions. Films and television shows can apply for the tax incentives as late as five days before commencing principal photography; commercials have until 24 hours beforehand.

Though officially it can take 45 days for Hawley and the legal department to sign off on applications, productions have ample time to submit. Upon approval, they'll receive an accredited production certificate (APC) that allows them to send in their claims even years later depending on scheduling, timing and accounting for bigger budget productions.

While the state offers top-notch airports, hotel accommodations and restaurants, that's actually not the most germane component for application approval. Almost surprisingly, the goal is for productions to note that they're coming to Illinois specifically for the tax incentives.

For productions seeking to hire Illinois residents in order to maximize their returns, the film office is devoted to cultivating a diverse, well-trained crew. With educational infrastructure in place and multiple programs aimed specifically at creating a knowledgeable local work force, the state makes it simple for productions.

There is an additional 15% incentivized bump for hiring crew from underserved areas in the state as determined by census data. The Illinois Film Office requires a breakdown of the gender and ethnicity of state-based crew and productions must



← Gov. J.B. Pritzker signed a 10-year extension on the tax perks that Peter Hawley (bottom) says leaves plenty of money to go around.



prove their attempts to fulfill roles according to the initiative, and that may include providing contact information for anyone they attempted to hire beyond the actual contracted crew.

"We have, perhaps, the most diverse crew base in the country," says Hawley. While there is some variance, APC-holding projects fill roughly 50% of their positions with women and minorities.

When productions sell off their tax incentives, a portion of the transfer fee goes toward funding the training programs. In that sense, the entertainment industry is developing its own in-state talent to call upon for years.

Illinois has worked tirelessly to provide the necessary infrastructure that productions depend upon in any film-friendly state. In addition to the tremendous crew base, the state can supply productions with vendors and studio spaces to fulfill all of their needs. There's a bonus: on top of the tax credits, "it's also typically less expensive to film here in Illinois than it is on the coasts," Hawley says. 📍

“

**We have, perhaps, the most diverse crew base in the country.”**  
— Peter Hawley



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# Work Development Programs Strengthen Production Allure

**Ambitious plans set for pipeline to bring in future generations** • *By Brent Simon*

In “**Field of Dreams**,” Kevin Costner’s Iowa farmer, haunted by mysterious whispered intonations of, “If you build it, he will come,” plows under part of his property to construct a baseball field.

In the real world, though, infrastructure is somewhat meaningless without skilled workers. That’s why Illinois is so intent on strengthening its development and education programs, to both boost local economic numbers and help create a trained crew base that will entice productions to commit to the state.

“If you don’t have a workforce you don’t have an industry,” says Ashley Rice, co-managing partner and president of Cinespace. “So it’s all about workforce development, and creating jobs and pipelines for more crew to be available to be hired locally.”

Of course, ambitious plans take a village. So it’s an all-hands-on-deck approach to creating more visible pathways of entrance.

In 2019, Illinois Film Office director Peter Hawley persuaded the Illinois General Assembly to set aside \$500,000 for a pilot film and TV workforce training program



↑  
Fresh Films runs a summer camp at Augustana College in northwest Illinois

for 2020. The schedule for that grant was set back for two years by COVID, but it proved a success, upskilling approximately 90 students — more than 70% of whom landed paying industry jobs. Rolled over for 2023, it added 125 more students in training this winter and spring, and starting in July there will be an ongoing training program tied to Illinois’ expanded production tax credit through 2032.

Along with government efforts, there are also industry training programs working hand-in-hand with labor organizations.

“Our program, I think, is blossoming,” says Michael Scott Jr., director of industry and community relations at Cinespace Studios, which sponsors a workforce development program called CineCares, pairing young people with below-the-line professionals to help them learn the business from the ground up. Since 2017, more than 70 trainees have gone through the program, and over 50% of those trained in union positions have been invited to join the union.

“Tony Barracca has been a stalwart and champion for this program,” Scott says. “This is something that is really helping to diversify and bring folks from underrepresented communities into this industry.”

The growth is everywhere, reflective of a holistic approach to answering the industry’s call for an expanded workforce. According to Barracca, business manager secretary treasurer of IATSE Local 476, union membership has grown from 750 in 2009 to 2,050 in 2022, with 40% of that total now under 34 years of age.

Meanwhile, institutes of higher education offer their own strong industry pathways. Schools including DePaul University and Columbia College Chicago, of course, boast established and highly rated film programs. Second City Film School also has a variety of programs specializing in the development of comedic content and production.

Additionally, Augustana College in northwest Illinois is in the process of establishing an undergraduate film program that will focus on training industry professionals informed on film and TV history, as well as production in multiple forms. “Students will graduate with a robust production portfolio in hand that will represent their own aesthetic and creative vision and skill level as a member of a team,” says Stacy Barton, associate professor and film program director.

As for the future, while touting colleges as a great springboard for talent, various community stakeholders are also eyeing peer-to-peer mentorship programs and even a potential film production class curriculum in high schools to further solidify community relationships and the local pipeline to union positions. “The membership is strong and we’re ready for more,” Barracca says.

“Our industry is not a 9-to-5 regular job — we are unique in the hours that we work, the locations, the conditions,” says Cinespace’s Rice. “But at the same time we can offer an incredibly enriching job experience for people.” 🎬

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# State Preps for Growing Production by Upgrading Facilities

Additional soundstages, studio complexes built for TV and commercials • By Brent Simon

**Illinois pulled in** a record-breaking \$1.256 billion in qualified film and television production spending over the past two years. And with 14 existing soundstage facilities within city limits, Chicago is no toddling town.

In fact, with two additional sprawling studio complexes in the works, Chicago is setting its sights even higher, looking to further increase its production footprint.

The expansion is bolstered by the strength and stability of a 30% state tax credit locked in through 2032. “They made meaningful amendments last year ... and are open for business — they are serious about supporting long-term growth, long-term commitment,” says Ashley Rice, co-managing partner and president of CineSpace Studios, whose ample space — more than 1.6 million square-feet — and plum location 15 minutes from downtown Chicago have established it as a market leader.

Rice would be in a position to know. Her previous experience as exec VP of production for Legendary Television put her on the other side of the table, alongside filmmak-

ers, when deciding where to take productions. Now tasked, among other things, with CineSpace’s day-to-day management and client and government relations, Rice oversees the 36 stages where most major series in Chicago have been filmed over the past decade.

Several developments seek to augment the city’s production boom, with services that are complementary and additive, as well as facilities that provide for future demand.

“Films and TV [shows are] bolting us on to their existing projects because they ... can come into our space to take care of this shot or that scene,” says Scott Greenberg, co-founder of Smash Virtual Production Studios, a dedicated LED volume soundstage that opened in 2022 with a full-time staff of six. “Some TV projects are now even able to write scenes they can do in our volume that they wouldn’t have been able to before.”

Greenberg is also bullish on the cost-effectiveness of virtual spaces in helping to keep local and regional advertising firms closer to home, fueling a potential return



↑ CineSpace Studios’ prime location and ample square-footage makes it a market leader.

to a commercial production hey-day of 15 years ago.

“In a short period of time, we’re now bringing back advertisement production to Chicago that would never have even come here if we’d not opened,” he says.

Additionally, there are plans for two large studio complexes. In the heart of Chicago’s South Side, on a lot that had been vacant for 20 years, a groundbreaking ceremony was held in February for Regal Mile Studios, a 380,000 sq.-ft., 7-acre enclosed media campus that will open in 2024 and include 220,000 square-feet of soundstage space.

“The need for diversity in the provider space is long overdue,”

says “The Chi” executive producer Derek Dudley. Teaming on the project with Loop Capital Markets founder and CEO Jim Reynolds he was able to realize a personal vision and — in pairing with a fellow African American and South Side native from a different industry — set an example for future generations.

“We want to help grow Chicago into being an entertainment mecca, and the Hollywood of the Midwest,” Dudley says. “And it’s going to take a village to make that happen.”

Still coming into focus, meanwhile, is a North Side project, being developed on a 22-acre property by Knickpoint Ventures, that would devote some 1.5 million square-feet of warehouse space on the former Marshall Field’s site to a film production campus.

But it’s Chicago’s overall production footprint that’s poised for the biggest breakout.

“We want to help create a real pipeline for all Chicago creatives to feel supported and realize their talents can not only be born out of Chicago, but thrive here,” Dudley says. 📍

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# Chicago Stages Seed Talent

**Steppenwolf, Second City and smaller theaters feed**

**a vibrant artistic scene** • *By Paul Plunkett*

## The oversized contribution

Chicago has made and continues to make to the American entertainment landscape comes in no small part from its vibrant and varied theater scene.

With well over 200 theaters, from small stages featuring intimate fare to larger houses sending major productions to Broadway and beyond, it's difficult to find any American film or television series that doesn't have roots that trace back to Windy City stages.

The Steppenwolf Theater Company is one where heavy-hitters John Malkovich, Laurie Metcalf and Gary Sinise forged their craft early in their storied careers. Playwright and actor Tracy Letts premiered his Pulitzer Prize-winning "August: Osage County" at Steppenwolf in 2007.

"It's a lot easier to produce good theater in Chicago than in many other places," Malkovich told Roger Ebert back in 1984 and that still applies today. "You can always get a few people together and put on a play."

Chicago has the distinction of receiving the most Regional Tony Awards of any city, for major theaters including Steppenwolf, the Goodman, Victory Gardens, Chicago Shakespeare and Lookingglass.

Adding to Chicago's theatrical contribution to the zeitgeist is the immeasurable impact of the Second City. What began in 1959 as an improvisational comedy troupe has grown exponentially into a comedic empire. Franchising its classes and shows to Toronto and Los Angeles, the Second City's legendary alums read like a who's who of comedy, from "Saturday Night Live" (Dan Aykroyd, John Belushi, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Cecily Strong, to barely scratch the surface) and "SCTV" (John Candy, Eugene Levy, Catherine O'Hara and more) plus the talent behind countless other film and television projects (Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Jordan Peele, Stephen Colbert, Harold Ramis).

But Chicago isn't simply a training ground or a springboard to the coasts, nor is it just about actors

and writers. There's an entire ecosystem of professionals living and working in all sides of film, television and theatrical production.

"The continuing growth of television and film production has provided the opportunity for workforce development," says Jennifer Jobst, president of IATSE TWU Local 769, which covers theater as well as film and television. "Participating in community outreach through training programs and education provides the union as well as the entertainment business with the opportunity to develop interest and encourage people to enter this career path."

Jobst points to Chicago Made, an Illinois workforce development program where hands-on training both provides career development while helping productions, as well as the Illinois Tax Incentive, which she says provides a professional

stability, allowing workers to feel confident in pursuing and maintaining a sustainable career in Illinois in the entertainment industry.

Economic benefits from the industry to the broader community also flow to homegrown suppliers.

"The various costume and wardrobe departments depend on local vendors to support the work of the departments, including fabric stores, cleaners, cobblers, screen printers and retail," Jobst says. "As unique and sometimes demanding customers, we share vendors that are skilled and willing to meet the challenges and demands of the entertainment costume departments and wardrobe departments."

Ultimately, there's no shortage of opportunities for learning about theater in Chicago and Illinois, and plenty of places to ply the many trades that make up the industry. 



→ The Steppenwolf Theater Company was founded by Gary Sinise, Terry Kinney and Jeff Perry.

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