

# Everyday Democracy

## Citizen Advocacy Center Newsletter

### Intern Edition 2013



Summer at the CAC is the place to be if you are a high school, college, or law student looking for hands-on experience in learning the law, civic, and community organizing tools that build democracy and impact government decision-making. Interns work under the supervision of community lawyers and answer community intake questions, investigate complaints of anti-democratic activity, conduct policy research and analysis, participate in litigation and more. Thank you to our summer interns, their academic institutions, and the Public Interest Law Initiative.

- The Citizen Advocacy Center Staff & Board of Directors



*“I found many surprises; the largest one being the way information is used by government entities.”*

**Kelly O'Halloran**  
Northwestern School of Law  
Rising 2L

When I started at the Center, I expected to work on constitutional issues, write inter-office memos, and research issues; yet I was not certain what particular projects I would be addressing. I did not expect that my work would include creating a good governance policy to be used by clients to help monitor government nor did I think that I would help shape how the Center responded to local issues. Instead of acting as a typical intern, I had a great deal of responsibility to effect change in democracy.

I spent most of my time drafting a good governance policy for an election authority and briefing a large election bill recently passed by the Illinois General Assembly.

***In compiling the good government policy, I had to find ethics policies for election authorities that delved into political activity, campaign contributions, and conflicts of interest. The policy I drafted tightens ethics policies to remove even appearances of impropriety.***

Despite coming from a political science background and law school, I had no idea about the bureaucracy involved in Illinois elections and how much control individual counties hold over elections and who gets on the ballot.

In briefing House Bill 2418, I learned that it was surrounded by controversy. The bill created an on-line voter registration system, however, the implementation requires a driver's license or State identification. This could be interpreted as a de facto voter ID requirement. HB 2418 also mandated the creation of an election commission in Lake County. This is noteworthy because in Illinois, DuPage County is currently the only county that uses an election commission; most elections are facilitated by the county clerk. HB 2418 specified the location and population of the counties that had to change to election commissions. It appeared as if the credentials could apply to many different counties. This, however, was not the case. Lake County is the only county in Illinois that fits the description.

***Apparently, I was not the only one who found the provision peculiar. My real-life issue spotting was validated when a lawsuit was filed in Lake County challenging the election commission provision on the basis that the bill was special legislation.***

A client intake I worked on was helping a community group address discrepancies in the implementation of bilingual education program at an elementary school. In Illinois, districts must use a Home Language Survey to determine if the district should test a student for bilingual education. My work involved researching the tests, parent notification policy, and drafting a compliance summary to help individuals determine whether the district is in compliance with the Illinois regulations for bilingual education.

*Kelly O'Halloran continued*

Overall during my internship, I found many surprises; the largest one being the way information is used by government entities. While there is certainly a duty to disclose information, the volume and manner of how information is produced makes it difficult for the public to find information and allows bad practices to continue. I was also surprised at the number of barriers to voting. Small logistical, seemingly innocuous, changes to the election code can have a devastating effect on a person's ability to vote. I was also surprised at how powerful local government is and how it exercises far more influence and control over our everyday lives rather than the national government.

I was pleasantly surprised by the amount of community involvement that the Center facilitates and amazed by the relationships between the Center and the many community organizers. I had the privilege of meeting many of them and am thankful for the opportunity to work at the Center. I learned so much about where I would like to work and what kind of lawyer I would like to be.



*“Working at the CAC has given me a unique perspective on what it takes to address challenges to democracy.”*

**Collin Kee**  
**North Central College**  
**Rising Junior**

Interning at the CAC has given me a whole new perspective on a variety of topics. Prior to working here I had a very limited scope of what promoting democracy from the ground up actually looked like. As a Political Science Major, this is something that I yearned to experience.

*Thankfully, the CAC provided me with many opportunities that took into account my skill level. The assignments were challenging, enlightening, and gave me the opportunity to get involved with members of the community.*

Working alongside various volunteers and interns, I was never far from someone who could offer insight into a topic I was working on. This collective knowledge proved to be a valuable asset to me.

Learning more about democracy proved to be a very interesting endeavor. The challenges to democracy, I have come to learn, are many. Although things such as corruption normally come to mind when thinking of what impedes democracy, there are more legal challenges that are often overlooked.

***A number of projects I worked on dealt with finding information that is difficult for the general public to locate. In some instances, the absence or difficulty in locating this information was against the law.***

One project I worked on was a statewide survey of Illinois townships and counties testing compliance with the Open Meetings Act (OMA). This is a collaborative project between the CAC and the Illinois Press Association. Specifically, I checked whether these townships or counties posted agendas, meeting time, date, and location 48 hours in advance prior to the meeting, as required by law. Many entities failed to comply with posting requirements. My project results will help the CAC hold these townships or counties to account.

***Another project I worked on was compiling TIF or tax increment financing data (such as how much revenue TIFs bring in from property taxes or how much of the TIF fund is being spent and what it is being spent on) for all communities in DuPage County.***

There is no law that specifically applies to the posting of TIF data so information can be difficult to locate (or in some cases non-existent). For those that had TIF information available, it was posted in a number of places: on the community's website and at the Illinois Comptroller's Database.

Working at the CAC has given me a unique perspective on what it takes to address challenges to democracy. As a matter of fact, working here has caused me to totally redefine democracy. Democracy is made up of informed citizens who have access to the information they need to act. Having citizens who are informed and engaged is the best way to ensure a properly functioning government and democracy and having worked toward making that a reality has been a rewarding learning experience.



**Smiling Interns**



***“I was intellectually challenged in some capacity every day.”***

**C. Alexandra Hicks  
Michigan State College of Law  
Rising 3L**

I wanted to intern for the CAC because I think that it is important to press for more civic involvement. In a time of economic crisis, rising gun violence, and the devaluation of universal education, it is easy to see how much the people’s voice is needed yet barred from the process of meaningful decision-making. It should be easy and encouraged that all kinds of people participate in the political process. This is the CAC’s mission and the way that I most wanted to spend my summer. It has been a better experience than I imagined.

First, I had the opportunity to work on some amazing projects.

***My favorite project involved the researching of alternative elections methods; I drafted petitions so that home rule municipalities could have the opportunity to vote on the adoption of a new voting system by ballot referendum.***

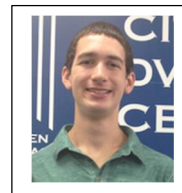
The petition drafting was especially rewarding because my research showed that the referendum wording must be precise and clear. This is challenging because case law showed that alternative election referendums have been struck down specifically because the language was not clear enough.

I spent my first year of law school regretting the decision to attend. But working at the CAC has given back to me my confidence and determination to succeed in the field of social justice. The CAC is full of brilliant people; lawyers and non-lawyers alike. There are so many barriers to participation for everyday citizens with limited funds and busy lives but the ability to live the values held by the CAC (to empower people to bring about change) through my work this summer has been an amazing experience.

Second, I was intellectually challenged in some capacity every day. My legal writing skills have improved along with my confidence and ability to effectively work with the public. I have also identified the legal skills I possess that need sharpening. I have become a more fulfilled worker and more successful student because of the CAC. Maryam and Terry are some of the most hardworking and brilliant people I have ever worked for. Their enthusiasm is infectious and as leaders, they embody the CAC’s mission in every way.

***Great leaders do not just have good ideas. Great leaders are also committed to expanding the knowledge of those around them.***

Lastly, the experience of working on local government issues has been invaluable. While most Americans focus most on national politics, it is local government that most affects people on a daily basis. Local government is a whole other political animal given how little public oversight there is in regards to local politics. There were several times that my colleagues and I have remarked that without the CAC, local governmental democracy may be nonexistent. The CAC gives ordinary citizens a voice and opportunity to participate in democracy and working here has allowed me to recommit myself to the value that democracy is more than just voting.



***“...alternative election systems have the potential to begin correcting the inequalities of the current election system.”***

**Eric Patterson  
York Community High School  
Rising Junior**

I interned at the CAC because I am interested in going into law and politics as a career path. Interning at the CAC seemed like a good opportunity to meet people who actually have careers in the field. I also wanted to get a taste of what working in an advocacy group is like. While most of the law school interns told me horror stories about the amount of work law school is, interning here has given me great insight into how, by working in this field, you can affect people’s lives for the better.

The main way that I have seen this effect has been through the projects that I and the other interns have worked on. One of the three main projects has been to make an educational brochure on alternative election systems. This brochure is aimed at educating voters about the potential benefits and remedies that could be offered by a different system.

***Since most of my interest before coming to the CAC had been at the national level, it was very gratifying to work on a project that has the potential to affect how different states, counties, and municipal governments can operate.***

*Eric Patterson continued*

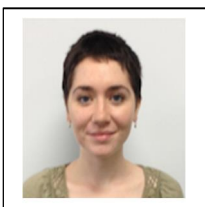
Alternative election systems have the potential to begin correcting the inequalities of the current election system (underrepresentation of minority races, gender, and political parties), potentially replacing it with a more representative system.

Another project I worked on is a library public body project, where I collected information from a sample of library districts across the state.

***I compared things like tax levy rates, budgets and how library districts allocate resources, such as cutting back budgets for books and resources while increasing salaries.***

My last major project was to act as a watchdog, by checking the websites of Illinois school boards to see if they were posting information in compliance with the Open Meetings Act (OMA). The CAC is working on a project with the Illinois Press Association to determine if the OMA's language regarding web posting is too vague, and thereby allowing public bodies to not obey the requirements. My findings have been striking, with about 38% of school boards not being in compliance with posting requirements.

I walked into the summer much more interested in national level politics than the local or state level. However my work at the CAC has showed me how, at the local level, because government is so much closer to the people, people can affect individual lives a lot more (as the CAC routinely does). The work has been very gratifying in that I have seen that ability to do good played out to the fore while I have been at the CAC.



***"I saw how people were able to use the democratic avenues available to them to directly affect an outcome."***

**Claire Caniff,  
Mount Holyoke College  
Sophomore Rising**

I remember walking by the CAC last summer and seeing a huge poster in the storefront window outlining financial and procedural questions regarding the City of Elmhurst's creation of a 4<sup>th</sup> TIF district. CAC called the window posting their "TIF manifesto." I was fascinated by it, and immediately knew I wanted to get involved with such a great community resource right in my own backyard.

***I learned many factual things about government and the legal system while at CAC.***

I helped draft a brochure on alternate election systems, worked on the community impact of the English Language Learners program at Conrad Fischer Elementary School, researched municipal web compliance with the Open Meetings Act, and learned about the complexity of Illinois home rule. I also developed a much more sophisticated understanding of the structure of local government, and its various functions.

One issue in particular I worked on was a public/private six story project in downtown Elmhurst. A group of citizens felt the project had a troubling impact on traffic, was too large for the space, and had questionable financial issues. I watched as citizens actively petitioned the City Council to reject the proposal, voicing many of their concerns through public comments at City Hall meetings. The proposal was rejected by the City's Zoning Commission and was a huge victory for those who voiced opposition to the project. I saw how people were able to use the democratic avenues available to them to directly affect an outcome.

***Working alongside a diverse group of fellow interns was a learning experience in itself. From legal interns to high school students interested in government, everyone had something valuable to share. The different perspectives enhanced everyone's knowledge base.***

The most important thing I learned is the necessity of active, passionate, and engaged citizens to maintain the health of our democracy, and the value of their often-tireless attempts to improve and strengthen the democratic process. I learned many tangible facts and issues while at the CAC but it was the principle of active community engagement, accessible democracy, and the efforts of the CAC to breakdown barriers to participation that gave me a profound appreciation for the citizens who speak up when others seem not to listen or care.

Learning what an incredible resource and ally the CAC is to those who need it most was inspirational and I am so grateful for the opportunity to work alongside such amazing people and citizens.

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***“...all the interns hit the ground running working on projects, attending meetings, writing letters to the editor and assisting clients.”***

**Adrienne Kitchen  
Chicago-Kent College of Law  
Rising 2L**

I wanted to intern at the CAC because transparency and government accountability are some of the most important parts of democracy. I am fascinated by public policy, and the CAC is the perfect place to learn how people defend their rights, participate in government and fight to keep government transparent and accountable.

I expected to spend the summer working on public policy projects, researching case law, investigating best practices and attending meetings. I did all this and much, much more. I was especially thrilled to assist with several client intakes because it gave me practice answering the real-world questions. I also learned about a variety of issues, observed the community lawyers and helped clients one-on-one under supervision.

From day one all the interns hit the ground running working on projects, attending meetings, writing letters to the editor and assisting with client intakes. I worked on two public policy projects. The first was a continuation of the CAC’s interest in government entities using Not-For-Profits for economic development and resulting transparency issues. I did intensive research on the Chicago Infrastructure Trust’s compliance with the Freedom of Information Act and the Open Meetings Act, analyzed the enabling ordinance, attended its public meeting, and obtained several documents. My second major policy project addressed Illinois’ Citizen Participation Act, a 2007 law designed to curb retaliatory SLAPPs (strategic lawsuits against public participation). These are meritless cases designed solely to stop someone from participating in government.

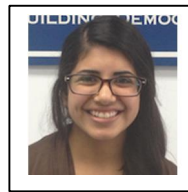
I also vetted several client intakes, including one about procedures for the appointment of a public official and another about possible defamation. The defamation question involved statements made by an individual during a government public comment portion of a city government meeting.

***The question was whether or not a recent candidate for public office who lost and was now to be an appointed public official was a “public figure.” I found that in Illinois there are several categories of public figures; including candidates for public office, and those who end up in public controversies.***

Attending village board meetings let me see how the issues I researched played out in the real world. I was impressed by the dozen or so people who stood up and asked their board to work together to fix the community. On the other side, trustees commented about being held back by people continuing to voice their concerns; so much so that the government body I monitored moved public comment to after executive session at the end of the meetings, making people wait until about 11 p.m!

My biggest summer surprise is home rule. I learned that even on the occasions when ordinances appear to give a clear answer, it turns out that a municipality can do whatever it wants and claim “home rule” and it’s acceptable. This, of course, raises issues of how individuals and entities can rely on the laws when any municipality can decide, at any time and without reason, that it wants to throw its laws out the window and do something different.

It has truly been a remarkable experience getting to see passionate people fighting for their rights, working with others who care about public policy, and obtaining guidance of two community lawyers who obviously love their work.



***“....a true citizen doesn’t fear public disapproval when it comes to fighting for their rights. “***

**Janaki Thakker  
Community High School  
Rising Junior**

As a high school student, I feared that interning at a community law firm would involve making photocopies or bringing coffee to the lawyers. But after starting I was told that not only was I saved from running to Starbucks, but I would actually be doing projects that affect real clients.

***The beauty of being a CAC intern is that CAC gives hands-on opportunities to all interns – no matter what level they’re on.***

I practiced legal research and did community work on my own. One of my projects hit close to home. The CAC’s civic education program works with high schools to make civic education hands-on. Providing interesting and engaging speakers for Constitution Week is one element of the program. In 2012, CAC invited Jessica Ahlquist, a high school student who sued her school in federal court after the school refused to take down a Christian prayer banner from their wall. The focus of Constitution Week was her talking about how she fought for her constitutional rights.

182 N. York St,  
Elmhurst, IL 60126  
www.citizenadvocacycenter.org  
630-833-4080

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***Janaki Thakker continued***

When a local news reporter picked up this story, it was overtaken by the fact that she is an atheist. That article attracted more than 300 comments about whether she was an appropriate speaker for students. Since CAC sponsored her visit, I was asked to research and categorize comments for a CAC paper on civics and teaching controversial issues. Most of the high school students stated that Ahlquist was a great speaker and understood that she was there to explain how she argued for her constitutional rights. Many of the parents were offended because they emphasized atheism and theism instead of constitutional rights. It was eye opening to see the different perspectives.

Another project I found interesting involved a municipal 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade. A client was concerned that the parade was supposed to be "non-partisan," but local elected officials were representing their parties in the march and it appeared as if representatives from an opposing political party was not allowed to participate.

***We talked to municipal officials and made FOIA requests for the policies. Within two days, the public officials silently changed the rules of participation!***

I was motivated by the person who called and their willingness to fight for the issue even though other citizens and officials didn't want to deal with it. The client argued for our First Amendment rights, which showed me how

important it is that there are citizens ready to step up and that a true citizen doesn't fear public disapproval when fighting for their rights.

Interning at the CAC has taught me about different levels of government, how to communicate effectively, local politics, and much more. I spent my summer with many other intelligent and supportive students and worked with talented community lawyers like Maryam and Terry. I never thought that instead of serving coffee here, I'd get one of the greatest opportunities to learn about my community, my rights, and my duties.

