

EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

A NEWSLETTER FROM THE CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

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photo by Tony Pacini

SUMMER INTERN NIGHT The Citizen Advocacy Center recognized its 2014 summer interns at its annual Democracy Night on July 24 at Café Amano in Elmhurst. Front row from left: intern Christopher Annis, CAC Community Lawyer Andrea Alvarez, interns Alec Kramer, Georgia Smithee, Abbey Moffitt, and CAC Executive Director Maryam Judar. Back row from left: interns Krystian Seebert, Amie Leonard, Adam Walker, Cassie DeBolt, and Mike Chada.

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 and developing the civic and community organizing tools that build democracy and impact government decision-making.

Interns work under the supervision of CAC's community lawyers. They answer community intake questions, investigate complaints of anti-democratic activity, conduct policy research and analysis, participate in litigation, and more.

In the pages that follow, interns share their thoughts about CAC, the projects they worked on, and what they learned from the experience. Thank you to our 2014 summer interns, their academic institutions, and the Public Interest Law Initiative.

— CAC Staff and Board of Directors

Coming from Iowa, where presidential candidates face scrutiny for years before the primaries begin, I was initially taken aback by the level of secrecy within Illinois government.

Through interning at the Citizen Advocacy Center, I realized how important it is to monitor local and state government to ensure democracy thrives, and how it takes passionate citizens to truly make a difference.

We worked each day to increase transparency, openness, and accountability within the greater Chicago area, and I felt like my time here was well spent getting to know the issues and making an impression



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ABBHEY MOFFITT, Rising 3L
University of Iowa School of Law

on the community.

I was surprised by how quickly I could make an impact once I started my internship. Within one week, I was at a meeting of the Geneva City Council commenting about how the city did not have a published public comment policy. Just two days after

voicing my opinion, the City of Geneva published a public comment policy! Now, citizens of Geneva can be aware of the procedures for addressing the council before they arrive. I felt I was witnessing a city

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This is the difference between law school and the Citizen Advocacy Center: In law school, I spent three weeks discussing the finer points of which person owns a fox when two people pursue the same one; at CAC, I spent three weeks surveying elected officials in DuPage County to make sure they filed conflict-of-interest documents.

The fox-hunting lectures set me back approximately \$1,200. My work at the CAC didn't cost me a penny. Only one of those experiences taught me a practical skill that translates into actual legal practice, and it's not difficult to guess which one.

My first project at CAC related to the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority's plan to acquire land in Bensenville for the purposes of expanding and maintaining the Tri-State Tollway.

This issue is important because acquisition of that land means Bensenville loses the tax revenue that ordinarily comes from the affected areas. Loss of tax revenue means the village cannot spend as much to maintain itself, and the people in the area suffer for it. Working on this project taught me just how far the government may go to acquire land for use



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ADAM WALKER, Rising 3L
University of Michigan
School of Law

that it deems is for the public good.

Another project involved preparation for a CAC seminar that would inform citizens on how to properly construct and file a petition to put a public question on a ballot for referendum. First, I delved into statutes to familiarize myself with the intricacies of the law. The second half of the project required me to construct a "Q&A" that put the legal language into something designed to inform everyday citizens. This project was a skill-building

exercise that honed my ability to explain complex language in a casual format. That talent is crucial for a legal practitioner because a lawyer must both counsel and relate to clients.

I also observed local government in action when I attended a Schiller Park school district meeting. That community has seen its schools go through turbulent times recently. The entire special education department even resigned in one meeting. I witnessed the impact this had on the community. It shattered some and galvanized others to action.

CAC is not just another legal business that cloisters itself within the four walls of its office. Instead, it engages in true advocacy and helps people in ways one does not typically associate with law.

I came to CAC with no expectations. I didn't know who its clients were or if I wanted to do work related to government. CAC let me interact with and aid real people with real problems. I was not another cog in the wheel of a big business or a big firm trying to achieve maximum profit. I know that in the future, whatever I do, I will continue to help individuals and keep an eye on my local government.

As a CAC intern I was asked by several people what I would be doing at my summer internship. I crafted my answers around the words "building democracy in the 21st century," and I received confused head nods, as if they did not understand but pretended to anyway. I am excited to answer this question again, because the experiences and skills I developed at my summer internship far exceeded "building democracy in the 21st century."

I engaged with citizens and strengthened my communication skills, enthusiastically participated in local government, and learned about the laws surrounding municipal government. Each learning experience helped to mold me into a more active, engaged future attorney and citizen.

Citizen engagement proved to be the most important thing at CAC. Clients walked in the door with some beliefs that I was not aware existed, and in fact friends of CAC can be found across the political spectrum. The CAC environment shed light on the importance of the political playing field, and how engaging with participants



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AMIE LEONARD, Rising 3L
The John Marshall Law School

from differing political beliefs makes a more efficient and ideal democracy.

I believe a place like CAC is needed in every community, where anyone can walk in and ask for help in making sure everyone's government is accountable. Participating with local governments was the most fun, because I was thrown into environments where real problems were occurring.

For example, within my first week as an intern I encountered first hand an issue about separation of church and state at a city council meeting. I watched as an alderman made an announcement that gave rise to the issue. Since I had attended

the meeting, I was able to research and write about the issue the next morning. My research and writing allowed me to speak on the subject, and I gave my very first public comment concerning that issue at the next city council meeting.

Each project I completed, each citizen I engaged with, and each intern I worked with taught me the importance and value of working together with our differing beliefs to strive closer toward attaining the ideal of true democracy. Above all this internship gave me many valuable lessons that are motivating me to get active, be heard, and always strive to learn, especially from others who are different from me.



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CASSIE DEBOLT, Rising 2L
University of Dayton School of Law

Before starting my internship with CAC, I had no idea how local government worked, what it meant to be an informed citizen, and the impact individuals can have on their communities. I wanted to learn how to advocate for citizens and get real legal experience. I was surprised by how many issues CAC handles and how many different issues are important to people in the community.

My internship offered me an opportunity to do legal research into many different issues. When I got my first project researching library district budgets, I was handed 200 pages of budgets. I was overwhelmed with how much information the budgets contained and how much math

was going to be involved with the project.

Shortly after beginning the project, I submitted my first Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for additional library district budgets. I had never heard of FOIA before my internship. I found it interesting to see that library districts used similar formulas for creating their budgets despite their varied locations in the state.

My second project concerned lobbying registration and reporting requirements. I had previous experience with lobbyists and the reporting process at the state level, so learning about reporting requirements at the county and municipal level proved interesting to me. I enjoyed seeing how these requirements could be implemented locally to create more accountability and

transparency in government.

For me, one of the best parts of the internship was hearing from the clients on issues they are passionate about. I was able to see different sides to many issues and the impact the issues would have on the community.

I loved to see what issues different people were passionate about, whether it was gambling, township government, or parking availability. It was a great feeling knowing that passionate individuals like CAC volunteers and clients exist to help their communities. They inspire me to be a better citizen.

As I leave my internship, I am more certain of my decision to attend law school and become a lawyer. My legal experience at CAC has shown me there are so many options for what I can do with my legal education and how I can help my community in the process.

I'm grateful for the people I have met and the experience I have had at CAC. I have learned to be a more informed citizen and to be courageous enough to stand up for what I believe in within my community.

Throughout law school, I've become increasingly discouraged about my future within the legal profession. The stress of law school brings out the worst in people, and I've had difficulty understanding how I might fit into a profession where monetarily defined "success" is the ultimate goal.

My summer at Citizen Advocacy Center has been transformative. It has truly been a pleasure to work for individuals who care about substantive issues rather than the pursuit of profit, who care about the well being and intellectual growth of their interns, and who practice and advocate for a healthy work-life balance.

I have had an unparalleled opportunity to grow as a legal professional because CAC fosters such a positive environment. I have received constructive feedback that has enhanced my legal writing skills. I have developed a greater ability to solve problems. And through my research work, I have become more adept at using my legal database resources, such as Westlaw and the Illinois Compiled Statutes guides.

The most interesting substantive topic that I researched was the legality and



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Indiana University
Maurer School of Law

ethicity of an art-loan program started by the mayor of Bloomington, Illinois. I found the art-loan assignment particularly stimulating because instead of my analysis concluding with an answer of either "legal" or "illegal," I was able to make recommendations for implementing not only a fully compliant art-loan program, but also one that yields revenue for the City of Bloomington. It was also exciting for me because it was an opportunity

to integrate some of my undergraduate coursework into my legal work to formulate a multidisciplinary solution.

While I enjoyed researching and writing, I especially enjoyed attending policy-centered meetings and participating in the policy advocacy process. For example, after the General Assembly passed H.B. 105, which amended the state election code, I attended a meeting at the Cook County Clerk's Office where a committee discussed how best to implement the new provisions in a way that would make legislators and constituents more favorable toward further reforms of the code.

The ensuing discussion expanded my thinking about the legislative process and helped me understand the long-term goals of legislation. It was inspiring to be in a room with the individuals responsible for making voting more accessible in upcoming elections.

In sum, working at CAC positively influenced me on both professional and personal levels. I hope that I was able to contribute as much as I was able to learn from my experience there.



“Not only is my interest in law fueled, but I am more eager to become an active and responsible citizen in my own hometown.”

MIKE CHADA, Rising Senior
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

As a rising senior at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I am about to be faced with the real world. Attending law school has always intrigued me; however, before I make a commitment to such a big decision I wanted to get some exposure to the field.

When the opportunity arose to work at CAC I saw it as a fantastic experience that could aid in my decision-making. Although I was only able to be at CAC two days a week, every time I came in the whole staff welcomed me. The legal interns turned out to be a very useful resource as I learned about their personal experiences from law schools throughout the Midwest.

Since I was not a law intern, one

of my fears was that I was not going to be able to work on projects that actually have an impact. Thankfully, my assumption was wrong. I worked on projects concerning electoral boards, government transparency, and even had the pleasure of having articles I wrote posted on the CAC website.

I came to CAC with the intention of learning more about law; however, I realized that my general understanding of democracy and local government was not as developed as I would like it to be. My research on Illinois electoral boards helped me learn about the many layers of government in the state and how widely government varies.

I also attended the summer speaker

series and learned valuable information on topics that I would otherwise not have been exposed to, such as fair housing and boilerplate (or “adhesion”) contracts. I found the information offered on these topics to be valuable not just to people interested in the law but also to the average citizen.

Another project I worked on was compiling a database of surveys concerning government transparency in Illinois. I was surprised to see how many different organizations are working hard toward a common goal of a more transparent and accountable government. My hope is that through the work I did, it will be easier for organizations to collaborate on future projects.

This summer at CAC turned out to be more than I expected. Of course I was exposed to law as I had hoped. However, I also learned invaluable lessons on simply how to be a good citizen, which left a lasting impression on me.

Not only is my interest in the law fueled, but I am more eager to become an active and responsible citizen in my own hometown.

The college admissions process, among other things, demands a high level of certitude from the applicant with regard to what he or she wants to major in. Throughout my junior year, I kept telling myself that I was going to major in political science. However, once I dived into the essay portion of the applications and their mind-bogglingly simple yet complex questions, I began to question what political science really was, and if there was any point in devoting my future livelihood to government and politics.

CAC answered that question with a resounding “yes” during the course of my internship, as I bounced around from project to project, witnessing the political system in action and observing local government.

I began the summer examining wireless radio fire alarms. The City of Elmhurst mandates that businesses subscribe to a fire alarm service provided by the city. Such a service could increase costs for a business into the thousands — a major expense for small businesses — and no one was doing research as to whether the



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ALEC KRAMER, Rising Senior
York Community High School

prices being charged were fair or if the service provided any benefits compared to the old system. Ultimately I found that the system did provide genuine benefits, and there were no suspiciously high cost discrepancies. Nonetheless, the fact that no one had bothered to question or investigate the policy sooner than that was shocking to me.

So too was my experience in surveying municipalities about minority participation in government contracts. As part of this

project, I had to use the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to request this information from many municipalities because they failed to provide it on their websites. When I began my requests, much to my shock many of these municipalities failed to comply with FOIA.

Even when I received responses, many failed to provide original documents, or in a few cases, instructed me to go digging for them myself. These obvious violations were appalling to me. Based on my summer experience at CAC, I can only imagine how commonplace these violations are throughout Illinois.

As a result of my internship, I am more aware and have a greater level of political efficacy than ever before. I realized for the first time that just because a local government is nonpartisan doesn’t mean it is safe from corruption. Rather, municipal corruption can gain hold as a direct result of the public’s apathy toward local politics.

In my view, we need more political science degrees. We need more people to be not only interested in but highly educated about government and politics.

My summer with Citizen Advocacy Center has greatly informed me about local and state governments. I learned that to check corruption in government, citizens have tools such as the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) that allow them to see what their government officials are doing in performing their public service.

During my time with CAC, I used FOIA to research the questionable hiring of a government employee and to examine cities' potential nepotism in contract awards.

Another tool citizens have is running for political office. However, campaign funding is an issue that many potential candidates face. CAC advocates public campaign financing as a remedy. To assist with this initiative, I researched public financing in other jurisdictions and learned how it can mitigate the harsh effects of unlimited campaign contributions.

At the beginning of my time at CAC, I aimed to learn more about the legal profession, and I did, especially laws concerning open government, a field I



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KRYSTIAN SEEBERT
Rising Junior
Villanova University

had not considered before the summer.

However, I found that CAC's greatest influence on me is my newfound interest in local government. Perhaps someday I will hold an office in my local community, and when I do, I will remain true to the values I learned at CAC.

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become more transparent through a little push at a local government meeting.

My favorite project involved monitoring the General Assembly and encouraging Gov. Pat Quinn to veto a recently passed amendment to the Illinois Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). House Bill 3796 amended the Illinois FOIA to create a new category called "voluminous requestors," which is another avenue for public bodies to withhold public documents.

I helped address how the bill would impact Illinois citizens who use FOIA and discovered that the "voluminous requestors" provision created a serious roadblock to disclosure when other more fair means were available for the government to deny a request.

CAC held a press conference to inform the public about the contours of the legislation and to encourage a veto. The event coincided with the deadline for the General Assembly to send the bill to the governor's desk. Fortunately, Gov. Quinn vetoed the bill the day it arrived in his office, heeding CAC and a coalition of good government groups as well as citizens and the Illinois attorney general.

It was disappointing at first to watch such impactful legislation pass through the legislature in a lackluster, secretive way. However, it was uplifting to see the bill vetoed after CAC's campaign for awareness on the issue, which included radio appearances, email alerts, and the press conference.

Throughout the summer, I became accustomed to the way Illinois politics operated, and my eyes opened to the amount of work that needs to be done to monitor local government.

My time at CAC felt useful and meaningful, and it was clear that we were making an impact on the community and helping passionate citizens solve important local problems. I came out of the experience feeling not only like a better legal writer, but also a more informed citizen and a more confident legal advocate.

2014 CITIZEN INITIATIVE AWARDS



On Tuesday, Dec. 9, CAC will recognize its 2014 Citizen Initiative Award recipients. These local community activists were catalysts for democratic participation while using civic, legal, and community organizing tools to advocate for an issue of public concern:

- Batavia Ratepayers for Fair Electricity, Batavia, IL (Kane County)
- Park Truth, Plainfield, IL (Will County)
- Joan Metz, Indian Head Park, IL (Cook County)
- Gerri Songer, Hawthorn Woods, IL (Lake County)

When: 7 to 9 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 9

Where: Café Amano, 116 E. Schiller St., Elmhurst, IL

RSVP to 630-833-4080 or CAC@CitizenAdvocacyCenter.org

Event is free and open to the public

Suggested Donation: \$10

Details at www.CitizenAdvocacyCenter.org/events



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ABOUT US

The Citizen Advocacy Center is a nonprofit, nonpartisan community legal organization and 501(c)(3) corporation dedicated to building democracy for the 21st century by strengthening the citizenry’s capacities, resources, and institutions for self-governance.

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Almost immediately after arriving at CAC for my internship, I began research on an issue concerning the Prairie State Energy Campus, which gave me a fascinating lesson about the revolving door between government and business.

That first day also yielded another project: examining the 425-page response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request about a DuPage County Board pay raise.

After the board had raised its own pay, a concerned citizen had requested public records concerning the decision-making process behind the raise. The board sent back hundreds of pages of documents ranging from city park ordinances to a full 100-page transcript of a board meeting from 2006. It was only after sorting through these unrelated documents that I truly realized how vital watchdog groups and concerned citizens are in keeping government clean.

I can quite honestly say that when



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CHRISTOPHER ANNIS, Rising Senior
 Wheaton North High School

I walked through the doors of the Citizen Advocacy Center, I never expected to end up working on a project for a client from the NAACP. The project itself seemed simple enough: find the ethnicity and gender of the heads of the companies that received city contracts, and submit the data back to the NAACP.

This quickly grew into one of my most challenging projects of the summer. However, unlike my earlier experience with the DuPage County Board’s response to a concerned citizen’s FOIA request, I found scores of FOIA officers ready and willing

to go above and beyond what was strictly necessary to help me obtain the information I needed, and the project became easier the more we cooperated.

I had a basic understanding of what CAC did from its website, but nothing on it had prepared me for what I found inside: a group of incredibly motivated lawyers and interns fighting to preserve democracy itself.

Knowing that I was making a difference every day I walked through these doors was the most rewarding feeling in the world, and I am going to work to make sure that after I leave CAC, it’s a feeling I will never lose.