

EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

A NEWSLETTER FROM THE CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

INTERN EDITION • FALL 2017



SUMMER INTERN NIGHT The Citizen Advocacy Center recognized its 2017 summer interns at its annual Democracy Night that was held at the Wilder Mansion in Elmhurst. Front row from left: Leah Lopez, Warisha Aslam, Bella Costanzo, Executive Director Maryam Judar. Back row from left: Jonathan Stone, Community Lawyer Ben Silver, Adrienne Arlan, Dominic Dinon.

Summer at 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 2017 summer interns, their academic institutions, and the Public Interest Law Initiative.

Growing up in Cook County, I was no stranger to political dysfunction. I was exposed to it at an early age because my hometown of Summit was a hotbed of political cronyism. I grew cynical about the nature of local government because of my early exposure to political dysfunction in the state of Illinois. However, I was instilled with community values by my parents, so I never stopped trying to improve my community. I have a desire to fix what is broken in the system, and so when I was looking for a summer legal internship and stumbled upon the Citizen Advocacy Center, I was excited about the opportunity to make a difference.

I'm blessed to have been able to attend law



"I was instilled with community values by my parents, so I never stopped

trying to improve my community."

Dominic Dinon, Rising 3L
Maurer School of Law

school. One of the main lessons reinforced by my professors is that it's a privilege to be a lawyer, and with that privilege comes a responsibility to make the world a better place. Summit and its surrounding communities helped me get to where I am today, and I feel that I have a responsibility to use my education to make

a positive impact there – CAC helped me do that.

This summer was a fantastic learning experience. I worked with residents of Cook County who presented various issues at their local governments. These residents are some of the most passionate people I have ever met, and much of the work they are doing is based not on their own self-interest, but rather on an altruistic desire to improve their communities for other residents. Citizens like the ones I worked with this summer give me faith that democracy is still alive and relevant.

As a legal intern, I conducted legal research on several matters by searching

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"I truly believe that information is power, and that open and effective government is rooted in making information and procedure publically accessible."

Leah Lopez, Rising 2L
Northwestern School of Law

If I had to choose one word to describe my internship experience at CAC, it would be educational. I applied to intern at CAC to broaden my understanding of local law, as well as to take my first step on a possible path to a career in government. I was interested in working for CAC because I feel that the role of local government in people's lives is greatly underemphasized and overlooked, despite the fact that it forms the bulk of citizens' interactions with the law.

Conducting factual research and investigations was my favorite aspect of working for CAC. Coming from a background in the humanities, where the research is primarily academic, I was excited to see the conclusions I was drawing change in real time as I uncovered more data and information. I researched and investigated a range of features of local government, including home rule, local taxation, the financing of public libraries,

the composition of a public body, requirements for public comment under the Open Meetings Act, the constitutionality of lobbying regulations, the process of passing a bill, and legislative avenues to address the epidemic of sexual misconduct on college campuses.

While I believe that it's important to balance governmental efficiency interests with a need for transparency, working at CAC really clarified how powerful particular laws can be in serving the informational interests of the public, particularly with respect to the Open Meetings Act and the Freedom of Information Act. I was surprised to find out how seriously the state of Illinois took these laws, particularly OMA.

I truly believe that information is power, and that open and effective government is rooted in making information and procedure publicly accessible, particularly with regards to legislation and rulemaking.

Understanding why a law is passed and who the law is intended to serve is crucial to good governance and to empowering citizens to participate in shaping their lives.

The most important lesson I've learned from CAC is just how crucial the local news media is to serving the informational interests of the public. Though I've always been an avid news consumer and strong advocate of the free press, my interests were primarily geared toward headline-driven national news centered on major events. Even though the reporting may appear routine and unobtrusive at first glance, local news provides a public record that is essential to keeping local governments accountable. In no way could I have called my research at CAC complete, including research on such "major topics" as the Constitution and the First Amendment, without resourcing local news articles. I hope our society will continue to carve out a space for local reporting, as it truly serves as our "eyes and ears" on government.

My experience at CAC has been extremely rewarding, and I look forward to using the knowledge I've gained to promote transparency and accessibility at all levels of government.

INVEST IN BUILDING DEMOCRACY IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Your investment means providing free legal counsel in matters of citizen concern

CAC monitors and advocates for open and transparent government, trains citizens and students in civic engagement, and provides resources in the form of citizen guides, civic education lesson plans, and other tools that increase the knowledge necessary for effective civic engagement. All gifts are fully tax-deductible. You can give by sending a check with the envelope provided or by visiting www.citizenadvocacycenter.org/donate

Citizen Advocacy Center expresses appreciation to those generous supporters who have made an investment to support our mission this year. Our list includes donors who have permitted the publication of their names. Thank you to all our anonymous donors, as well.

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statutes and case law, wrote memos, gave public comment at meetings of local public bodies, and contributed to compiling a database that will make the Attorney General Public Access Counselor's opinions more accessible. I also wrote a letter to the editor imploring people to become active in affecting local government issues.

My policy project was on an all-too-familiar issue: Illinois has no compulsory mechanism for enforcing ethical rules in local government. I researched the laws of other states to identify what, if any, mechanisms they employ to ensure that local public officials comply with their ethical obligations. I have found that, with

few exceptions, states have put in place measures to hold local public officials accountable. My hope for this project is that the findings will result in a law in Illinois similar to what states like Iowa, Missouri, Ohio, or Wisconsin have in the way of local government ethics enforcement.

My summer at CAC has given me hope for the future. Despite my cynicism about local government operations, the residents that I had the pleasure of working with filled me with optimism that one day the State of Illinois can operate more effectively due to efforts of organizations like CAC and passionate citizens.

GIVING DAYS are two special days, in May and November of every year, when many nonprofits join together to highlight the difference donors are making.

The next special Giving Day will be #GivingTuesday on November 28.

A special thank you to our ILGive donors who participated in May:

Philip Barr	Richard Hosteny
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"I often hear the words, 'be the change you want to see in the world.' At CAC,

I saw the impact citizens have on local government."

Jonathan Stone, Rising 3L
Georgia State School of Law

As a second-year law student I wanted an opportunity that would allow me to delve deeper into constitutional law. While searching for a summer legal internship, I learned about the Citizen Advocacy Center and the possibility of working with constitutional issues at the local level.

My first assignment helped me to better understand CAC's mission to build democracy and promote civic engagement. I worked on an issue of ballot access in the form of a citizen-initiated binding referendum. Residents in the Village of Forest Park collected signatures to place a binding referendum on the ballot to ban video gambling in their village. The Illinois law known as "the rule of three"

barred the possibility of their referendum getting on the ballot. The rule of three limits certification and publication of referenda on the ballot to three per public body, on a first-come-first-serve basis. Since three other referenda, with less onerous signature-gathering requirements, were filed first in Forest Park, it precluded any other citizen-initiated referendum to appear on the village election ballot.

The issue raised First Amendment concerns. I was thrilled to put to use my recently-acquired knowledge about the Supreme Court's public forum doctrine in analyzing whether "the rule of three" is constitutionally suspect. I delved into whether an election ballot is a public forum deserving of greater First Amendment protection, especially where the citizens collect signatures for a referendum that is binding by law, and three citizen-initiated advisory questions preclude the appearance of the binding one on the ballot. This research will help to evaluate a First Amendment challenge to barring citizen-initiated binding referenda from election ballots.

In addition to the legal knowledge and practice I gained, I found that a big

takeaway from my summer experience was that a healthy democracy requires an active citizenry. CAC promotes civic engagement and encourages citizens to interact within the framework of American democracy. The ballot access issue was emblematic of CAC's mission: village citizens took an active role to affect local government, but barriers stood in their way. CAC builds democracy by assisting the civically engaged to better navigate local government and advocate for reform to strengthen public participation in democracy.

I often hear the words, "be the change you want to see in the world." During my internship at CAC, I saw the impact citizens have on local government. I met many passionate and inspiring residents actively working to make positive change in their communities. In law school, students hear that as future lawyers we should work to give back to the community in positive ways. Actively engaging in democracy, impacting the public, monitoring government, and holding government accountable are ways in which I anticipate I will give back to the community and "be the change" I want to see in the world.



"My internship has opened my eyes to the breadth and depth of CAC's

impact on Illinois citizens in ways I didn't know were possible."

Adrienne Arlan, Rising 2L
Maurer School of Law

meaningful public participation in local and state politics. I had heard about the organization's mission to promote direct democracy and to seek more transparent government in Illinois; my internship at CAC has opened my eyes to the breadth and depth of CAC's impact on Illinois citizens in ways I didn't know were possible.

My main project this summer was to search through all of Illinois law to find opportunities for direct democracy, with a focus on citizen-initiated binding referenda. I dove into the complex state statutory framework, and I realized how difficult it would be for an Illinois resident to navigate it. I learned that Illinois limits opportunities for citizen-initiated binding referenda in comparison to other states; and I drafted reform recommendations to improve the accessibility of citizen-

initiated binding referenda in Illinois. This project is the first of its kind, and it allowed me to explore all the chapters of Illinois state law.

An ultimate takeaway for me from my internship is that not only is it important for Illinoisans to get involved in local politics, but to understand the procedures employed in enacting public policies. Previously, I had little idea about the public participation opportunities that I researched this summer, and I newly recognize that as a voter, an activist, and a political thinker, it is essential to know the possibilities for direct democracy. I am forever grateful to the team at CAC for reminding me of my civic responsibilities; equipped with the knowledge I've gained, I feel more secure as a law student and future attorney.

While searching for a summer legal internship, I knew for certain that I wanted to make it meaningful. When I discovered the opportunity at the Citizen Advocacy Center, I was excited about the chance to meet my goal. I wanted to gain exposure to an area of law that I did not know much about. My internship at CAC has shown me how integral direct democracy is to

Interned at the Citizen Advocacy Center because I aspired to know more about the functions of local government. Initially, I was expecting to do a lot of background research and grunt work. However, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that my contribution to the projects I worked on brought to the forefront the gaps and weaknesses in laws affecting local government and public participation so that organizations like CAC and the civically engaged can make positive community impacts.

One of the projects I worked on dealt with applications for volunteer positions on municipal boards and commissions that advise the municipality. The issue arose because a Forest Park resident brought to CAC the village's volunteer application for examination. It appeared exceedingly onerous and invasive as it required personal information, such as one's Social Security Number and credit history. Additionally, it asked whether the prospective applicant has a personal history that could be embarrassing to the mayor.



"My attitudes on local government and civic engagement have transformed."

Warisha Aslam, Rising Freshman
Purdue University

The application questions discourage residents from participating in their local government. Through research, we learned that the questions specific to Forest Park's application were outliers. Along with another intern, I researched the applications for these volunteer positions from over 95 municipalities throughout DuPage County and Cook County. We created spreadsheets, made FOIA requests to the municipalities whose applications were not available online, and wrote a memo that analyzes the types of questions that appear on these applications. We identified which questions were pertinent to the application process, and made the recommendation that municipalities amend their applications to stick only to these pertinent questions.

Another project I worked on was a collaboration between CAC and the Illinois Press Association to survey local government compliance with website notification of meetings and agendas as required by state law. This project will help maintain standards in our state laws to keep our local governments transparent and accountable.

My internship taught me that that citizens have numerous rights and ways to hold their government accountable. I was surprised by the depth of local government activity. My attitudes on local government and civic engagement have transformed. I used to be a passive observer because I did not think that I could make a difference. I learned that in order to preserve and protect our democracy, we need "all hands on deck," and everyone should strive to be actively involved. I plan on attending local government board and committee meetings. My internship working alongside lawyers, law students, and mentors in a supportive environment has been a great learning experience.



"I've seen what kind of power a group of motivated citizens can have to improve their community."

Bella Costanzo, Rising Junior
York High School

I came to the Citizen Advocacy Center looking to learn about local government and to experience working in the political sphere. I wanted to see what kind of impact I could have on my community. Happily, my goals were met beyond what I thought was possible during an internship at CAC.

Before coming to CAC, I knew very little about local government bodies and what they do; and therefore, I thought they did very little. I've learned about the extent to which local government can add to or limit our rights, which I had no idea were so

broad. One of my main projects was to support the Illinois Press Association to hold local government accountable. I worked to gather information from over 500 local Illinois governments including municipalities, townships, school districts, and counties, for a survey of their website notice compliance. For example, a board of any of these local governments that does not post or publish an agenda 48 hours prior to the start of their public meeting is in violation of the Open Meetings Act. Holding local governments to this requirement helps to ensure that citizens have the opportunity to exercise civic engagement by going to the meetings, monitoring the actions of the local government, and speaking up when need be.

I've learned that I feel very strongly about keeping local government accountable for its actions. We Americans place a lot of emphasis on keeping the federal government accountable for its actions. In contrast, when it comes to local

government, we do very little to keep it accountable. During my summer, I saw concerned citizens seek assistance from CAC to hold their local public officials accountable. I found this extremely inspiring; it reminded me that local government needs to be checked by the people, just like state and federal governments do.

My CAC internship has been extremely rewarding. I was surprised to learn about all that local government actually does. I learned about government powers and procedures while broadening my research and writing skills. What I think is most important, though, is that I learned about the power that we as citizens have to influence our local government, and the magnitude of change that can be achieved through citizen actions. By working with the team at CAC, I've seen what kind of power a group of motivated citizens can have to improve their community, and it's a learning lesson I will carry with me as I move forward in my own life.

YOUNG PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP BOARD

The Citizen Advocacy Center launched the Young Professionals Leadership Board in July 2017. This Board is a group of twenty and thirty-somethings who support the mission and values of CAC to build democracy for the 21st century by creating greater civic engagement, open and transparent government, and assisting citizens as they seek to organize, advocate, and become active in civic matters. Interested professionals under the age of 35 are invited to get involved.

For more information about the Young Professionals Leadership Board or to apply, please visit:

www.citizenadvocacycenter.org/YPLB-application

OR email our development associate Susan Wakefield at susan@citizenadvocacycenter.org





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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.

CONTACT US

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2017 CITIZEN INITIATIVE AWARDS

On Wednesday, December 6th, CAC will recognize its 2017 Citizen Initiative Award recipients. CAC awards local community activists who are catalysts for democratic participation while using civic, legal, and community organizing tools to advocate for an issue of public concern.

WHEN	WHERE	RSVP
Wednesday December 6 6:30-8:30 p.m.	Citizen Advocacy Center 182 N. York St. Elmhurst, IL 60126	Call: 630-833-4080 Or RSVP Online

The event is free and open to the public. Suggested donation: \$10.00.

Please see more details at www.citizenadvocacycenter.org/events