



IMPACT REPORT

2017

CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER





CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

BUILDING DEMOCRACY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Key Policy Issues Tackled in 2017

Ballot Access, Ethics, the Freedom of Information Act, Freedom of Speech, Home Rule, Immigrant Rights, Land Use, Lobbying Regulations, the Open Meetings Act, Racial Equity, Student Rights, Tax Increment Financing, and Zoning Regulations



→ 307
Citizen Cases

→ 53
Communities Served

→ 32
International Democracy Visitors

What We Do

The Citizen Advocacy Center is a hub for grassroots civic education and engagement. CAC engages with diverse individuals and groups across communities with racial, economic, ideological, cultural, and generational divides. CAC's work includes dozens of community-based organizations and actively engaged citizens around issues such as ballot access, discrimination, equitable education, open meetings, public records, and racial profiling.

Community Lawyering: Democracy at Work

The heart of CAC activities is community lawyering at the grassroots level. Community lawyers provide technical assistance, community organizing, policy advocacy, and traditional legal assistance.

Civic Education & Engagement

CAC educates and trains individuals, students, educators, journalists, and public officials in the laws and tools that ensure access to the democratic process. CAC teaches citizens how to take action to resolve community-based issues of public concern. CAC also provides free resources to engage, motivate, and empower the public to participate in the democratic process.

Government Accountability

CAC monitors government agencies for abuse of power and, when necessary, takes action to deter public officials from acting contrary to public interests.

Advocacy

CAC advocates for policies that expand opportunities for public participation and that improve government transparency, accountability, and accessibility.



Message from our Executive Director

Thank you for making 2017 another remarkable year for the Citizen Advocacy Center! 2017 ushered in a newly energized constituency who sought CAC's assistance as they got ready to act on the injustices they care about. With nearly 7,000 units of local government in the state, Illinoisans who wish to make a difference easily feel overwhelmed by the endeavor of attaining government transparency, openness, and accountability. When they contact us, CAC's community lawyers help citizens to focus their interests and efforts where they can effectively make the most difference.

Lately, the foundation of our democracy -- one that favors the expression of ideas no matter what the viewpoint -- has been challenged on a federal level by politicians and others who would suppress speech they find distasteful at best, and offensive at worst; and Americans have expressed outrage over the federal government's decreasing respect for the principle of free speech. Illinois citizens know that this disrespect is endemic in Illinois political culture and requires constant vigilance lest it succeed. CAC has fought speech suppression for almost 25 years in Illinois at both state and local government; we've also helped thousands of individuals and community groups to effectively participate in the government policy-making process.

***CAC's community
lawyers help citizens
to focus their efforts
where they can
effectively make the
most difference.***

Thank you for taking the time to learn about CAC's activities in 2017 and our holistic mission to engage people of all ages, backgrounds, and perspectives in the fabric of American democracy.



Maryam Judar
Executive Director



“Our success is a true measure of our most valuable asset of all – our people.”



Maryam Judar
Executive Director & Community Lawyer

Maryam Judar has spent her career working in nonprofits with missions to help citizens to achieve self-determination. She joined the Citizen Advocacy Center staff in 2009 as a community lawyer, and in 2013 became executive director. Maryam clerked for the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit after graduating from UCLA Law.



Ben Silver
Community Lawyer

Ben Silver joined the Citizen Advocacy Center staff in April 2016. Ben previously served as a Legal Fellow in the Office of Congressman Sander Levin, where he advised the Congressman and his staff on campaign finance reform and voting rights. While attending Georgetown Law, Ben served as a student lawyer in Georgetown’s Federal Legislation and Administrative Clinic where he advocated for the Student Non-Discrimination Act.



Susan Wakefield
Development Associate

Susan Wakefield’s career has spanned public service and corporate marketing. She holds an MPA degree from Brigham Young University and has served as a Utah State House Fellow, won a national writing competition with an article entitled, “Ethics in Public Service: A Case for Individual Responsibility” and managed the Annual Giving program of the American Bar Association. Susan joined CAC in January, 2017 to expand individual and corporate giving.



Ala Alkhatib
Administrative & Program Assistant

Ala Alkhatib joined CAC full-time in 2016. Her love for nonprofits began in 2011 when she joined CAC as a volunteer. Ala studied at College of DuPage, concentrating on journalism is currently pursuing studies in computer science. She has been Editor-in-Chief of the Arab American Architects and Engineers monthly newsletters, and is a member of several journalists associations. Her passions include photography, writing, and digesting legal lingo.



Community Lawyering: Democracy at Work

CAC is a public interest law firm. Free legal counsel and community organizing is at the heart of CAC's work: empowering citizens to know their rights, assisting citizens who seek to civically engage by organizing and advocating, and offering citizens guidance through the complex rules and regulations that govern our local, state, and federal institutions.

I support CAC

*because CAC empowers people
to be watchdogs of local
government and fight for open
and transparent government*

--Natale Fuller, Young

Professional Leadership Council

member

2017 Spotlights featuring the Citizen Initiative Awardees

Student-Led March in Support of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals

Jimmy Lynch, a senior at Glenbard East High School, wanted to take a stand to support his peers and neighbors who would be affected by the end of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Program. He organized a protest march in Lombard against the proposal to end the program. CAC advised him on municipal ordinances that govern marches, and Community Lawyer Ben Silver marched alongside the students as a legal observer.

Mental Health Care

Citizen activist Mike Murray pursued an effort to create a binding citizen-initiated referendum to establish a "708" Mental Health Board in Bloomingdale Township. Mr. Murray sought CAC advice to ensure that referendum met the ballot requirements for the April 2017 local election. The referendum appeared on the ballot and passed by a narrow margin. As a result, Bloomingdale Township will form a mental health board that will plan and coordinate mental health services for township residents.

Zoning and Neighborhood Character

A nursing home plans a 25,000 square foot expansion into two empty lots on Fremont Avenue, a residential street, in Elmhurst. Residents oppose the expansion as they believe it would negatively impact the character of their community and the enjoyment of their properties. They sought CAC's community lawyering assistance, and they appeared before the zoning commission and city council to present their case that the structure did not meet the standards for conditional use under the Elmhurst municipal code. CAC continues to work with community activists to advocate for clarification of the municipal zoning process and for a shift in favor from developers to residents. The issue is still under review.

Zoning and Suburban Gardening: "The Hoop House" Case

An Elmhurst family had built a temporary structure in the winter to extend their garden's growing season. After approving the structure in 2015, the following year the city gave notice that the hoop house needed to come down. CAC advised the family on avenues of redress through an administrative hearing and on how to organize neighbors and garner media attention. Eventually, the family sued the city. While they wait for a court decision, they are actively seeking a change to Elmhurst ordinances to allow hoop houses.





Civic Education & Engagement

CAC community lawyers are frequently invited by many institutions and organizations to share their knowledge and experience on topics ranging from the First Amendment to land use policies. CAC's community lawyers routinely speak before citizens, students, educators, journalists, and public officials.

CAC community lawyers made presentations to more than 30 organizations and institutions in 2017

Student Internships: Immersion in Democracy Media

CAC has a highly developed internship program where high school, college, and law school interns work alongside CAC community lawyers on substantive projects researching public policy issues; monitoring local governments; and updating CAC's many Citizen Guides to reflect current law and content.

Speaking Engagements

Here are a few examples of presentations made by CAC lawyers this year:

To the Public, including the Student Rights Series on free speech, privacy, discrimination, and discipline; and the "Skills for Active Citizenship" series on the tools for civic engagement.

To Students, including at Downers Grove South High School during Constitution Day.

To Educators, including at the Constitutional Rights Foundation Conference for Teachers of Civic, Law & Government, on "A More Perfect Classroom: Addressing the Disparate Racial Impact of Student Discipline."

To Policy Groups, Government Officials, and Media Groups, including the Council of State Governments, the Local Government Law Consortium, and the Chicago Headline Club.

CAC is frequently quoted by the media as a credible and reliable source of expert information on topics under the broad umbrella of democracy. In 2017, newspapers quoted CAC community lawyers and resources over 50 times!

World Democracy: Exporting CAC Community Lawyering

CAC receives regular visits from foreign visitors sponsored by the U.S. State Department International Visitor Leadership Program, which brings journalists, activists, and nonprofit and public officials to the U.S. for the purpose of building relationships to foster peaceful relations. They ask questions about ethics, open and transparent government, and the role of citizens and nongovernmental organizations such as CAC in public policy.



This year, CAC received delegations with visitors from: Algeria, Armenia, Egypt, Estonia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Norway, the Palestinian Territories, Poland, Romania, and Saudi Arabia.





Civic Education & Engagement Resources

Knowing that “knowledge is power,” CAC has dozens of free resources on topics vital to citizen activists as well as students, educators, journalists, and public officials. They provide critical information for civic engagement in Illinois. All are provided at no cost and can be accessed from CAC’s website.



New Lesson Plan: “How to Spot Fake News”

Recognizing the increasing use of the phrase “fake news,” this lesson plan explores its meaning: what makes some news “fake” and others “real”? The lesson plan covers criteria to distinguish between deliberate misinformation packaged as “news” and legitimate news through an examination of published news stories.

Over 40 free lesson plans and 20 citizen guides online



Our children should learn the general framework of their government and then they should know where they come in contact with the government, where it touches their daily lives and where their influence is exerted on the government...

--Eleanor Roosevelt

New Citizen Guides

CAC added to our library of Citizen Guides, a free resource for the general public. New additions are:

Economic Development Corporations and Transparency

Economic development corporations perform traditional governmental functions that are hidden from the public, but these entities are not subject to Illinois sunshine laws. This guide describes how promises of transparency by these corporations by putting related provisions in their by-laws suffer from a lack of enforcement. The guide advocates for an amendment to the Freedom of Information Act to cover records produced in the course of activities of economic development corporations.

Demystifying the Legislative Process

Although many have seen Schoolhouse Rock’s cartoon, “I’m Only a Bill,” which describes how a bill works its way through Congress and to the President’s desk, the process is much more nuanced. This guide describes in greater detail how a bill moves through the Illinois legislature and at which points citizens can lobby their elected officials for maximum effect.

Automatic Voter Registration in Illinois

Illinois is the tenth state in the nation to adopt Automatic Voter Registration. Individuals will automatically be registered to vote when visiting various state agencies and may elect to opt-out. This guide explains the nuts and bolts of the law.





Government Accountability

CAC responds to citizen inquiries and monitors local governments for undemocratic practices and policies that systematically impede citizen participation in the democratic process, which are embedded in local ordinances or state law, and which either need to be removed or reformed.



CAC publishes reports that provide recommendations for best practices that provide a platform from which change springs. Here is one example:

First Amendment and Local Government: Compliance with the Open Meetings Act “Right to Speak” Provision

Under the Illinois Open Meetings Act (OMA), citizens have a “Right to Speak” at meetings of government bodies; however, this is a relatively new provision that was implemented in 2011, directly due to CAC’s work. CAC has long monitored how public bodies implement public comment, and this report is a 2017 update of our 2010 report analyzing municipal government practices in this arena. Specifically, this report focuses on how municipalities have responded to the requirement of allowing members of the public to speak at open government meetings.

CAC recommended best practices for public comment, which included a prohibition on content-based regulations and an affirmative statement that the public has a right to criticize government.

Public meetings monitored by CAC: 57

Free Speech Rights for Student Journalists

At Evanston Township High School, student journalists wrote four stories about marijuana policy and use for the student newspaper, the Evanstonian. All copies of the student paper were confiscated one hour after distribution. Students sought an explanation from school administrators, without success.

Students contacted CAC, who advised them on: Illinois law supporting their student journalism, their right to address their school board, and how to prepare for giving public comment. The students and CAC Executive Director Maryam Judar spoke before the school board.

Government Transparency

CAC’s collaboration with the Illinois Press Association helped to defeat a fourth legislative attempt to pass a bill that would lift the requirement that public bodies publish public notices in newspapers of general circulation, in favor of mere online posting, which would eviscerate the independent and verifiable record of a third party publisher. CAC conducted a statewide Open Meetings Act survey of public bodies that indicated a poor track record of compliance with state law requirements for online posting requirements. The study was cited 14 times in Illinois newspaper editorials opining against passage of the bill.

Automatic Voter Registration

For a second legislative session, CAC joined good government groups to endorse a voter registration bill to bring Illinois into the 21st century. The measure passed the General Assembly and was signed by the Governor. Automatic Voter Registration in Illinois allows qualified voters accessing certain state government services would be automatically registered to vote unless they choose to opt out.





Issue Advocacy

CAC community lawyers advocate to strengthen the democratic process and to move systemic barriers that impair citizen access to local government.



Seeking Resolution through the Attorney General's Office

CAC assists with and files requests for review with the Illinois Attorney General's Public Access Counselor (PAC) to determine the applicability of state sunshine laws to public bodies. The PAC provides administrative review of Freedom of Information Act and Open Meetings Act disputes between citizens or the media and government bodies. The following are Open Meetings Act (OMA) disputes CAC filed or advised in 2017:

Open Meetings: Case Study - Public Participation in Equitable Education

CAC was contacted by concerned citizens from Ixchel, a community group founded by Cicero and Berwyn community residents connected to Cicero School District 99. Ixchel sought CAC assistance because their Bilingual Parent Advisory Council (BPAC) did not comply with OMA. CAC examined the framework of the law which supports the contention that BPACs should comply with OMA. CAC filed a request for review with the PAC, which is pending.

Open Meetings Case Study: Ad Hoc Mayoral Committee

CAC assisted a citizen in the City of Naperville to develop the legal arguments to support his contention that an ad hoc committee created by mayoral appointment to evaluate development proposals for a large piece of city-owned land should be subject to OMA. The committee failed to provide notice of its meetings, provide for public comment, or provide approved minutes. The issue is pending.

Open Meetings Case Study: Tax Increment Financed District Redevelopment Plan Public Hearing

CAC was contacted with a number of concerns about the Village of Summit's Tax Increment Financing (TIF) practices, including possible conflicts of interest and lack of oversight. CAC submitted a request for review to the PAC arguing that the village violated OMA by not noticing its public hearing 48 hours in advance. The PAC disagreed with CAC. CAC has identified this as an area for legislative reform so that citizens may be better informed of such public hearings.

Federal Courts Matter in Illinois

CAC joined the NAACP and other nonprofit organizations to support an independent judiciary, which is a cornerstone of American democracy. We signed onto a letter urging the Senate Judiciary Committee to recall two judges for additional hearings. The letter advocated that a new hearing was warranted based on newly discovered information that bears on their independence and brings into question their commitment to rule of law, and which the judges failed to disclose to the committee.

CAC continues to educate the public about the role of the federal courts and the Supreme Court of the United States through participating with Courts Matter Illinois, which is a coalition of diverse organizations and individuals working to ensure a federal judiciary comprised of judges committed to upholding core constitutional values, including voting and civil rights, workers' rights, freedom of speech, the separation of church and state, and the right to privacy.



Who We Are

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Ala Alkhatib, Office Manager
Ben Silver, Esq., Community Lawyer
Susan Wakefield, Development Associate

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CAC Directors, Past and Present: Terry Pastika, Theresa Amato, Maryam Judar

*Never Doubt That
a Small Group
of Thoughtful,
Committed
Citizens Can
Change the
World; Indeed,
It's the Only
Thing That Ever
Has.*

--Margaret Mead

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The work of CAC would not be possible without the support of generous individual donors. We recognize and express deep appreciation to those who have made a financial investment in CAC.

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Our Mission

Citizen Advocacy Center is a legal advocacy organization where community lawyers work with individuals and community groups on matters of public concern. CAC's mission is to build democracy for the 21st century.

*ALL CAC
services are free*

CAC's services are supported by foundation grants and individual donors.

CAC is deeply grateful for the generosity of our donors.