

EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER NEWSLETTER, THIRD EDITION, 2007

Working for the Benefit of the Community

When I first decided to volunteer at the Center, I was looking for an avenue to transform my love of political science into a hands-on experience. I found that avenue through working on a project that helped me to explore the importance of local government and informing the public about civic affairs.

The Center provided me with a fantastic learning experience. My project involved writing a brochure summarizing municipal government for newly elected officials and outlining their duties, powers, and resources. When I first started working on the brochure, the task was daunting because there is no uniform system of municipal government. However, as I progressed in my research, trends and patterns became evident and the brochure started to take shape. Part of my research included interviewing several local government officials, such as the Mayors of Elmhurst and Warrenville. Interviewing public officials provided me with the unique opportunity to hear personal stories of how they evaluate policy concerns and view the proper role of local government. The information acquired from my interviews and additional research enabled me to complete my project.

I also had the opportunity to meet Jeff Zurawski, a DuPage County resident on trial for disorderly conduct while engaging in a protest. Attending his preliminary hearings allowed me the opportunity to form my own opinion about whether or not his First Amendment rights were trampled on for protesting the Iraq war. In my opinion, there was a clear First Amendment issue present and I wrote a letter to the editor of the local newspaper voicing my concern. More importantly, I saw first hand what I felt was an injustice within the court system, which has further motivated me to become involved in local government. I now truly understand the need for the Center.

Finally, I had the opportunity to discuss my summer intern experience at the Center's "Intern Night" program. It was an incredible experience because of the impressive level of enthusiasm and interest showed by the audience, which was the general public and the Center's Board of Directors and Advisory Council. Their questions, comments, and high attentiveness to the details of my project gave me confidence that my work was valued.

The Center is a gift to society and comprised of wonderful people working for the benefit of the community. This summer, the staff and interns have given their time and energy to sustain democracy, ensure citizens' rights, and increase citizens knowledge of the democratic process. I will take the skills I have learned with me throughout my political and educational career.

*Ann Fefferman,
High School Intern
Senior, Wheaton North High School*

All year long, but especially in the summer, student interns invade the Citizen Advocacy Center! With their assistance, the Center prints more brochures, hosts more workshops, and holds open the doors of government to more people. Interns come to the Center from schools across the country, including: Elmhurst College, Indiana University School of Law, University of Illinois-Urbana/Champaign School of Law, University of Vermont Law School, and Wheaton North High School. Special thanks to the interns: Dan Basler, Tarrah Beavin, David Copp, Ann Fefferman, Jesse Traugott and to the Public Interest Law Initiative.

—The Center

Education for the Real World

Towards the end of my first year as a law student at the University of Illinois-Urbana/Champaign, I began my search for a summer externship and found the Center via my Career Services Office. Before entering law school, I worked as a case manager at a Chicago non-profit organization for six years. The reason the Center appealed to me was that during my entire non-profit work experience, I learned relatively little about the actual state laws that impacted my job. I welcomed the opportunity to educate myself and others about the statutes and ordinances at the local level that rarely get attention in law school, but which arguably have the most impact on citizens' daily lives.

Soon after starting at the Center I worked on an educational brochure to help explain land-use issues and citizens' rights to participate in local government meetings regarding land use. I also answered a variety of intake calls that involved learning the application of the Illinois Whistleblower Act, analyzing a contract for the sale of land between a park district and a municipality, reviewing and critiquing a paper created by a community group that conducted an in-depth analysis of tax assessor policies, and participating in the planning for a DuPage County civic summit for high school students. I also joined the other legal interns in analyzing Illinois Open Meetings Act and Freedom of Information Act statutes and cases for an on-going Center project.

The projects that I worked on are just a sampling of my summer experience, but they illustrate what I find to be its strongest and most original characteristic: all the research and analysis we do at the Center is in specific response to citizen inquiries on legal matters that affect their daily lives. These inquiries ranged from questions about property assessment to a citizen's right to hang banners in protest of government activity. Our work is shaped by the needs of the citizens we interact with, and as a relatively inexperienced law student, I learned a lot about the everyday application of law while trying to educate others. It was eye-opening to discover how much the Center can help educate and assist the local community.

*Mr. David Copp
Legal Intern
1L, University of Illinois College of Law*

Beyond A Legal Experience

Prior to starting my internship, I was seeking a place where I could get legal experience that would assist me with my plans of attending law school. The Center was clearly a place where I could learn the basics of legal research and legal analysis. I worked on several projects at the Center, but at the beginning of my internship, I developed a database using Microsoft Access. The database would be used by community lawyers and legal interns on a two-year project analyzing five Midwest states' Freedom of Information and Open Meetings Statutes.

After creating the database, I took hold of a project that I would call mine for the entire summer. The project was a Freedom of Information Act ("FOIA") survey to analyze school district responses to requests for superintendents' contracts. The FOIA survey was in response to a recent DuPage County Circuit Court ruling that allowed the withholding of a superintendent's contract based on a personnel file exemption. From working on the FOIA survey I learned the legally permissible route to request public information. I also learned that even though many things seem very simple on the surface, there are always complications. I learned how to draft a FOIA letter, gather and interpret responses, and draft appropriate appeal letters to respond to districts which either failed to respond to the request or denied the request. Through submitting initial FOIA requests and writing appeal letters, I learned a lot about the legality of accessing public documents as well as interpreting the responses of public bodies to FOIA requests.

In addition to conducting the FOIA survey and creating an Access database, I took on other smaller projects, such as researching and writing a land use pamphlet with a law student intern on how permits and zoning laws work in DuPage County. I enjoyed creating this brochure because it forced me to learn how to read county ordinances and translate them into a language that an average person can understand. I also updated the Center's Free Speech pamphlet.

I came to the Center seeking legal experience and received more experience than I could ever imagine. It has truly been valuable. I have personally grown from my internship and am proud of what I have learned. Everyone at the Center has been truly helpful and I am very glad that I have gotten the chance to intern here.

*Mr. Dan Basler
College Intern
Junior, Elmhurst College*

Open Government: *Real Power to the People*

In the law school world, “Public Interest”, “Non-Profit”, and “Pro Bono” are almost arbitrarily thrown about. I had no idea what the full scope of these words was – that is, until I worked at the Center. The Center is founded on a logical and relatively simple principle: government should be open and easily accessible to the citizens it serves.

The most interesting part of my summer was seeing how adaptable the Center’s philosophy is. In other words, there is more to open government than merely having the ability to observe government decisions. The Center teaches citizens that they can personally ensure that governments are accountable for their decisions. This became utterly clear to me as I worked through my main summer project: assisting a community group with concerns over the legality of the DuPage Water Commission’s (Commission) decision to deplete a large tax surplus by issuing rebates to charter customers. The community group wanted the Commission to allocate surplus monies to pay off outstanding bonds.

It turns out that open government was at the heart of this matter. My first action was to learn about the Commission and the powers it retains. After lengthy research, I learned that the Commission was created by loosely written legislation that contains little to no enforcement provisions. I also found that Illinois courts consistently defer to local governmental bodies’ decision-making authority. As a result, the Commission has phenomenal discretionary authority.

While legally the Commission was entitled to rebate taxes, the Center continued to assist the community group by helping them create an advocacy campaign to lobby the General Assembly for enforcement provisions. After seeing how receptive the community group was to organizing an advocacy campaign, I finally realized that open government means many things. Open government means making sure the government is acting honestly, truthfully, and lawfully. It also means finding loopholes and weak points in the law and taking action to fix them, thereby improving the effectiveness of government. Most importantly, it means understanding that citizens are always at the core of the democratic process. With proper knowledge and tools, there is always a means of solidifying that core.

*Mr. Jesse Traugott
PILI Legal Intern
2L, Vermont Law School*

Learning about the Benefits and Challenges in Working for the Common Good

When searching for a summer internship, there were three things that I was looking for. I wanted to work in a non-profit organization, explore issues of information accessibility, and do meaningful work that would improve my legal research and writing skills. I was fortunate enough to find all of these characteristics in the Center’s summer internship program where I accomplished my goals and acquired valuable information and skills.

Since deciding to go to law school, I have wanted to use my law degree to make a positive impact. My prior lack of non-profit experience left me unsure of how to achieve this goal, but working at the Center taught me about the benefits and challenges of working for a greater good. I have thoroughly enjoyed working with talented and committed people who have chosen to forego more financially profitable opportunities for the chance to enrich their communities.

In college, because of my journalism background, I learned to appreciate the value of the free exchange of information and witnessed the reality of limited information and often-unwarranted secrecy of public bodies and officials. The Center’s focus on Open Meetings Act and Freedom of Information Act statutes gave me the opportunity to explore these issues and expand my interest from the journalism context to the legal context. Additionally, I researched topics ranging from election issues to First Amendment rights and gained experience writing in a variety of mediums. I wrote traditional legal memorandums that engaged in complex legal analysis full of complicated legal terminology to news editorial letters that were short, focused, and persuasive.

I also learned a lot about working within the context of local government. In law school, the majority of research and writing assignments focus on federal or state law, but never municipal laws and ordinances that makes up a significant part of the Center’s work. I never realized how important it is to possess the skills to locate and analyze local laws.

Overall, my time at the Center has satisfied all of my personal goals for a summer internship experience. I was able to do meaningful work on interesting issues, gain public interest experience, improve my research and writing skills, and learn about legal work in the context of local government and politics. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to accomplish so much in such a short period of time.

*Ms. Tarrah Beavin
Legal Intern
1L, Indiana University School of Law*

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If you are interested in receiving more information, becoming a volunteer, or making a tax-deductible contribution to the *Center*, please feel free to contact or visit us.

**CITIZEN
ADVOCACY
CENTER**

Return Service Requested

Congratulations

Citizen Advocacy Center Board Member

Gordon Goodman

For winning The Downers Grove Area Chamber of Commerce and Industry's

Citizen of the Year Award

Winners of this award have performed outstanding service to the community by contributing their time, talents, and abilities to enrich Downers Grove.

Gordon Goodman has also been a Board Member of the Citizen Advocacy Center since 1997 and has contributed enormously to helping the Center build democracy. His insight and dedication to impacting public policy so that government operates in a more open and transparent manner, building community coalitions, and working to ensure that citizens have a voice in the community are an example for all.