

# Everyday Democracy

Citizen Advocacy Center Newsletter, Summer Intern Edition 2012

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During the summer, interns invade the Center! We look forward to hosting young people interested in learning how to build democracy and hold open the doors of government. This year a dynamic group worked closely with our community lawyers and volunteers on public policy projects, client intakes, workshops, brochure writing,

government monitoring, and more.

Thank you to interns: Michael Cannell, Ryan Hatten, Christie Pao, Elizabeth Polking, Sarah Wyatt, and Claire Zajdel.

Thank you also to: Public Interest Law Initiative, Case Western Reserve University School of Law, DePaul University College of Law, Harvard Law School, University of Iowa College of Law, New York University, and University of Idaho College of Law.

—The Center



## Elizabeth Polking University of Iowa College of Law, 1L.

As an incoming CAC intern, I was looking forward to gaining “law plus” skills that went beyond the technical instruction in the classroom,

ascertaining a sense of professional identity, exploring potential careers by delving into multiple areas of law, and attaining first-hand experience specific to public interest work. This internship provided me with unique and infinitely beneficial opportunities, as I was able to observe activities of legal professionals and the daily application of law, as well as partake in efforts that greatly impacted the local community.

My community lawyering experience was invaluable as I utilized and refined skills I had inherited in an academic setting, such as legal research and writing; improved communication and prognostic abilities; developed critical thinking skills; and embraced a role as a team player as well as a self-directed learner. Several aspects of the internship evolved as I expected, such as having the opportunity to interact on a daily basis with concerned citizens, organization leaders, and legal professionals. I had also correctly anticipated that I would be able to observe the law in practice and challenge myself in extrapolating statutory and case law to specific client cases.

I was pleasantly surprised by how greatly my expectations were surpassed in regards to real world experiences. In law school, I had grown accustomed to instantly relying on online research tools as the primary source of information. At the CAC, resources were vast and diverse, extending from local politicians, lawyers,



Interns from left to right: Christie Pao, Sarah Wyatt, Mike Cannell, Ryan Hatten, Elizabeth Polking, and Claire Zajdel.

and professional investigators to concerned citizens, organization leaders and journalists. We were encouraged to contact principal, as well as alternate, sources of valuable information and insight. The interns were shown how relationships within the community can heed remarkable benefits, how collaboration is always preferable to individual labor, and how one community issue may ultimately coincide with another in unexpected ways.

For example, most of my work centered on issues related to the DuPage County Forest Preserve District. My initial assignment entailed an evaluation of their current procurement policy, and evolved into addressing four separate intakes that arose in the span of two months, all relating to the same underlying issue within the governmental body: lack of accountability and responsiveness by a government entity. The issues I worked on ranged from the lack of policies to address a large surplus reserve, a complaint by a citizen regarding potential backlash due to FOIA requests, and concerns of volunteers, employees, and even contractors.

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The bulk of my internship centered on an analysis of the DuPage County Forest Preserve's procurement policy as compared to that of DuPage County, Will County, and the American Bar Association's model procurement code. In addition to analyzing the DuPage County Forest Preserve's Procurement Code for deficiencies, I made recommendations for reform. I found it especially enlightening to see how so many issues of concern were connected with the same governmental entity. CAC interns have the benefit of witnessing how an issue and/or controversy impact all citizens when discovered at a public meeting or through a FOIA request or a government press release. CAC interns observed community lawyers work with citizens on issues at the municipal, township, county and forest preserve level.

Before this internship, I maintained the notion that the majority of lawyering was remedying a wrong or a particular injury to a client. I quickly realized how being able to anticipate and prevent injustices, diagnose potential conflicts in the initial stage, and devise an approach before a problem fully develops are just as crucial in efficiently serving as a public servant. I was also surprised at how hands-on experience significantly facilitates the process of understanding legal concepts in comparison to the abstract conveyance of these same concepts in a formal classroom setting.

For me, the greatest benefit in this internship was being able to personally witness how my work impacted the community. Whether it was reading a newspaper article, watching the local news or public forum, or conversing with CAC visitors, the public involvement and newsworthiness of our projects made me realize the far-reaching implications and importance of our contributions. It was an incredibly rewarding experience to overhear discussion or coverage regarding a particular incident, and be able to grasp the inner workings of, or relay information on, the intricacies of that issue. Memorizing legal definitions, jargon or terminology, reciting well-known precedents or scholarly quotes, and recalling statutory authority is one thing. Actually comprehending how law is used, abused, and vindicated in practice is something else entirely different.



**Claire Zajdel, New York University, Sophomore.**

Before my summer internship at the CAC, I was a generally misguided and uninformed citizen in terms of government, policy, and politics. As a nineteen year-old, I have only been voting for a year and taken advance

placement government for my civic education in high school, so I was rather uncertain of my own political and governmental standpoint. Nonetheless, I began my work at CAC with the hopes of strengthening my writing prowess. My writing and editorial skills were put to test right from the start as I set out to create citizen guides and lesson plans for general instruction and civic education. Despite the fact that I was challenged to write in a more technical and direct tone than I was used to, I believe that my communication skills were ultimately not my most improved asset.

As the summer continued, I attended meetings to create informed Citizen Guides and listened carefully to all of the CAC's clients and luncheon speakers. The moments in which I listened were the moments in which I learned the most. Between the CAC's visitors and the staff, I've learned that personal ethics should form the foundation in government. Second, a strong ethical foundation should be combined with the government recognizing that it works for the community and meaningful community involvement is part of the government decision-making process. I've never really grasped the implications of these important principles in a democracy, which is understandable as I recently learned that the civic education standards in our schools are paltry. I've learned that you don't have to be on the "left" or "right" to have informed opinions and ethical convictions, and we all have a right to exercise our opinions in the public forum.

When CAC founder Theresa Amato spoke to the intern group

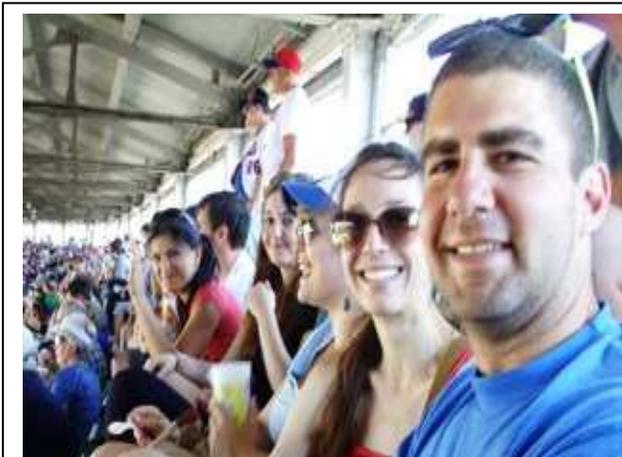
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Former Illinois Attorney General and Current Distinguished Fellow at Benedictine University's Center for Civic Leadership visit with CAC Interns to discuss Illinois politics and public service.

*Claire Zajdel continued*

one afternoon, something she said clarified my understanding of the duty I have to my community and to myself. She told us that even during the most difficult times in her career in law and public policy, she kept herself going by knowing that she was passionate about the work she set out to do every day. I realized that my future goals are to do the same. Although I have never been passionate about law, I have always been empowered by the written word. Words are used to transform our thoughts and beliefs into something that the world can comprehend. Whether this means through a poem, a newspaper article, or a Citizen's Guide to Property Assessment Appeals, words are powerful vessels. Every word can help to convey an idea to a person, a group, a community or perhaps even a country. As a result of the civic empowerment I have garnered at CAC, I plan to use writing and whatever career path accompanies it not only to tell stories, but to make a stand, inform people, and to substantiate my beliefs. As they say, the pen is mightier than the sword.



CAC Interns and Staff take a break from Building Democracy to enjoy a baseball game



### **Mike Cannell, DePaul University College of Law, 1 L.**

My summer internship with CAC deepened my understanding of what it means to be a community lawyer and an advocate for civic engagement. During my ten weeks, I was pleasantly surprised by the number of people who wanted to

participate in the democratic processes affecting their communities and lives. However, it was troubling to see that the machinery of government is beset with obstacles that discourage such engagement. In providing the legal advice and assistance to empower people to get involved and make their voices heard, the CAC fulfills an important role for democracy to work.

My first assignment involved finding a remedy for a client who wanted to raise an issue at an annual township meeting. His request was denied, in contravention of Illinois law, by his township board. This assignment was enlightening for a couple of reasons. First, it was a great exercise in research and analysis, as it involved interpretation, application, and synthesis of statutory and common law. More significantly, however, it illustrated the need for legal advocates who can assist citizens to be vigilant and hold governing bodies accountable. This client had the law on his side, a right to be heard, and through persistent advocacy forced the township to be responsive. It would have been easy for him to decide that pursuing a remedy would take too much time and effort. Had the CAC not been here to help him, he may have given up, but with the CAC's assistance and encouragement, he persistently demanded that the law be enforced and his right be honored.

My main policy project focused on the local administration of elections in and around Chicago. The goals of the project were to learn about how local authorities run elections, identify administrative similarities and differences across jurisdictions, and develop policy proposals and educational resources to promote fairness and increase ballot access. The research ranged from inquiring about the selection of polling places to the substance behind training election judges to practices behind the casting of provisional ballots. After surveying election officials from Chicago and the collar counties, a couple of trends were clear: 1) local election officials take seriously their duty to fairly and properly administer elections; however, 2) the election rules, particularly registration requirements, prevent many willing voters from casting a ballot.

From these observations it is apparent that even when public officials do their best to serve the public, it is still important that community members and organizations like the CAC to provide constructive input on how we can make our democracy work better.

Aside from these two projects, I have researched a number of other client issues, attended workshops and coalition meetings, attended public meetings, and written letters to the editor. I have met and worked with many people who care deeply about democracy and justice, all the while, strengthening my own motivation to be an informed and active member of the electorate. I have seen various ways in which lawyers can contribute to community organizing efforts, whether that is part of their job description or their role as community members. And I will carry this enriched appreciation for civic engagement with me as I finish law school and embark on my professional career.



**Christie Pao, Case Western Reserve University School of Law, 1 L.**

Ask most law students why they went to law school and you will get some version of the same answer. The common theme is that we want to make a difference in some capacity, advocate for people who need us, and positively impact others, our community, and the legal community as a whole. I came to the CAC with these broader goals

in mind: getting real legal experience, putting my first year law school education to beneficial use, and helping citizens who care about their communities exercise their rights and share their opinions and values in the public forum. During my internship, I honed my legal research skills while assisting people to find solutions to the problems they identified in their communities as most affecting them. I also researched public policy issues related to civic education standards.

Both CAC's mission and its expansive civic education program allows legal interns to build their legal skill set within the larger scope of issues confronting the CAC routinely. Issues of meaningful access to the democratic process are ever-present and demand tangible solutions. The exposure to the immediacy of resolving issues of concern furthered my appreciation and understanding of the legal process because it brought to life my first year studies, which are mired in history and the past.

I began my research project by looking at civic education standards and policies across the country. This research was useful when I attended the Illinois Civic Mission Coalition annual meeting, where members discussed how to strengthen civic education programs at Illinois secondary schools. (The Illinois Civic Mission Coalition is comprised of nonprofits, policy experts, lawyers, and teachers, among others, working together to improve civic education.)

Through my experience, two things became clear: 1) to ensure that future generations participate in and experience a healthy democracy, states need to put more focus on civic education, and begin teaching it in earlier grades than high school; and 2) while the law may provide a clear remedy, many times a coalition of organizations and stakeholders working for a common goal is necessary to advance solutions and resolve problems that face citizens. It is important to think outside the box and look past a legal remedy as the best or only answer. Thinking outside the box, which CAC does routinely, is one principle I will forever remember in my legal career.

I am thankful for the opportunity to have worked with the CAC and to practice my legal research and writing skills on current issues that affect real people. I am also grateful to now understand there are many ways to approach legal issues and it may take a nontraditional legal approach or a combination of legal and non-legal remedies to get the best outcome.



**CAC Interns Help Prep for Intern Night!**

# Check Out

## CAC's \*NEW\* Website

[www.citizenadvocacycenter.org](http://www.citizenadvocacycenter.org)

- **Make a Donation!**
- **Sign up for EMAIL Alerts!**
- **Read the CAC Blog**
- **View Upcoming Program Schedule**
- **Check out New Public Education Tools**
  - **Citizen Guide to DuPage County Property Assessment Appeals!**
  - **Elmhurst TIF Guide Primer**
  - **Newly Revised Civic Education Lesson Plans for Middle/High School**



**Ryan Hatten, Harvard Law School, 1L.**

Coming to CAC, I was excited to be in an environment in which I would work toward the public good. When I looked at the issues that are preeminent in the legal, political, and

governmental world – campaign finance, civil rights and government accountability to name a few – I was pleasantly surprised to find that CAC was active in all of those different areas. I didn’t know it at the time, but, through this experience, I would be exposed to all of these issues and more.

I came to the CAC with a strong interest in the private sector and I very much enjoyed how my interest in for-profit industries was taken into account when CAC community lawyers allocated assignments to me. As I worked on a private sector issue that had public policy implications, I was also exposed to various non-profit issues. Highlighted for me were core problems in our political and economic framework, which only served to redouble my commitment to working for change in some capacity.

My CAC internship also offered me unique opportunities that, from what I have heard, most other first year legal internships do not offer. For example, I sat in on intakes as CAC’s Executive Director talked with a client and discussed their particular concerns. As I worked on the client’s issue I contacted representatives to tailor the solution to their specific needs and circumstances. I felt as though I was putting my legal education into action.

Additionally, I found myself working on projects that were at different places in CAC’s pipeline. My first project concerned nonprofit economic development corporations. I researched and gathered information to help inform a larger project about the role these entities play in local economic development and issues of concern related to the democratic process. I also worked on a fiscal sponsorship matter as well as a tax increment financing issue that surfaced when a municipality issued a public notice for a TIF Joint Review Board meeting for a new TIF district. I learned how to adapt my work to deadlines driven by clients’ needs versus circumstances and statutes.

Lastly, when Elmhurst talked about the creation of three new TIF districts, I assisted in compiling information that CAC’s Executive Director used for a letter to the editor that was published in the local papers and relied upon by local reporters in covering the issue. It was a great feeling to see my work impacting the democratic process in a very tangible way.

I write without reservation that this summer has taught me about many of the interesting and fulfilling ways that I can use my legal education in order to affect change. I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to work on such major issues with so many people who genuinely care about the maintenance of a

healthy democracy. After this experience, I have a much better idea of what it means to be an advocate and give counsel, and when I return to my legal studies, I know that this experience will help me become a competent and compassionate attorney.

# CAC INTERN NIGHT!



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*Everyday Democracy* is a publication of the *Citizen Advocacy Center*, (CAC) a non-profit, nonpartisan, 501(c)(3) corporation. Submissions from citizen advocates are encouraged. The CAC is an educational and charitable organization dedicated to building democracy for the 21st century by strengthening the public's capacities, resources, and institutions for self-governance.

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

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### *Return Service Requested*



**Sarah Wyatt, University of Idaho College of Law, 2L.**

Before coming to the Center I expected to spend my entire summer sitting in the office conducting research and

writing memos. As a law student I am developing these skills to assist clients, but as a summer intern it's rare to be able to work directly with clients. My actual experience surpassed all of my expectations. Not only have I worked directly with clients, but I've learned some important lessons about the democratic process as well.

My first project involved working with a group of residents opposed to a proposed Walgreens neighborhood development. I'll admit that when I first read about the project I did not understand why the residents were objecting. However, as I visited the proposed site, spoke directly with neighbors, and attended a series of village board meetings regarding the project, I developed a better understanding why the neighbors felt a simple construction project could negatively impact the neighborhood. In working with the neighbors, I learned the importance of paying

attention to government action, voicing opposition and attending government meetings, taking advantage of public comment, and involving the media. In the end, the developer pulled the project and it was truly refreshing to see a how a small group of concerned individuals can cause change for the better.

My major policy project involved analyzing citizen objections to candidate nomination papers and their corresponding electoral board decisions. I was able to document three major issues regarding municipal electoral boards and make recommendations for reform. Working on this project helped me to understand how the complexities of government can be intimidating to even the most engaged residents. I also have developed a newfound understanding of how important it is for residents to act as the "watchdog" to ensure that all levels of government act in a transparent manner.

This summer I've worked on projects dealing with everything from land use to elections, and my experience has only emphasized how important it is to take an interest in government. My experience at the Center has been extremely rewarding. It has allowed me to put my knowledge of the law to use helping residents solve local problems. I have also been able to help educate residents on their rights thereby enabling them to better understand how to affect the local government decision-making process. Thank you for the opportunity.