



BUILDING DEMOCRACY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

A NEWSLETTER FROM THE CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

INTERN EDITION • FALL 2015



SUMMER INTERN NIGHT The Citizen Advocacy Center recognized its 2015 summer interns at its annual Democracy Night on July 24 at CAC in Elmhurst. Front row from left: Kelsey Weyhing, Kathleen Tunink, Andrea Alvarez, Megan Manoj. Back row from left: Greg Tsonis, Nick Parker, Carla Eisenberg, and Jumeka Wilson.

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 2015 summer interns, their academic institutions, and the Public Interest Law Initiative.

— CAC Staff and Board of Directors

I have wanted to be a lawyer for most of my life. When community lawyer Andrea Alvarez came to my school and spoke about the Citizen Advocacy Center I was intrigued by the idea of making an impact in a community.

During my time at CAC, I witnessed the significance that citizens can make in local government using the civic resource materials CAC provides. My first and major project was to compile a list of municipalities by county and check which were in compliance with the law that requires all public employers to post employee compensation reports. Employers that offer employee benefits through the



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MEGAN MANOJ, Rising Junior,
Elk Grove High School

Illinois Municipal Retirement Fund are required to post compensation reports on their websites, if they have one, or physically at the village hall or clerk's office.

I wrote an analysis about the information I collected. I learned that municipalities that maintain a website often fail to post the information

online for users to have easy access, but rather display the information at the municipal office. I think that this act should be reformed to mandate the information be posted to promote accessibility and enable the public to access this information whenever possible.

See **MANOJ** continued on page 2

In addition, I wrote a letter to the editor of the Chicago Sun-Times about crime prevention and at-risk youth programs for the city of Chicago, reviewed over one thousand documents regarding the Judicial Inquiry Board, and wrote 17 Freedom of Information Act requests to Illinois county assessor's offices.

This summer I learned the importance of using civic tools to engage with local government and speaking out for what you believe in. Even more, my time at CAC helped me realize the type of co-worker, employee, and citizen I hope to become one day.

I have heard a lot about citizen apathy in the news and how people nationwide do not seem to care about the public bodies that are supposed to serve them. It might seem, at first glance, that many people choose to ignore government ethics and transparency issues. They balk at the notion that things can change; that we might somehow be able to ensure that governments fairly represent the people they serve. I bought into this narrative before spending a summer at the Citizen Advocacy Center. But I now realize how wrong I was.

This summer I experienced citizens who care passionately about local and statewide issues. It could be a teacher



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NICK PARKER, Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI) Intern, Rising 3L, Indiana University Maurer School of Law

2015 CITIZEN INITIATIVE AWARDS



On Tuesday, December 8, CAC will recognize its 2015 Citizen Initiative Award recipients. CAC makes the award to 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: 7 to 9 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 8, 2015

Where: Citizen Advocacy Center, 182 N. York St., Elmhurst

RSVP requested but not needed 630-833-4080 or cac@citizenadvocacycenter.org

Event is free and open to the public

Suggested Donation: \$10

Details at www.CitizenAdvocacyCenter.org/events

who worries that deregulation and sloppy oversight might result in a tragic disaster and demands a change in corporate decision-making. It could be a local business owner who worries about smoking that could affect the health of his customers and wants to enforce the smoking ban around his premises. Or it could just be a citizen advocate who is confused and wants answers from a local village council. These are passionate, dedicated individuals who want the same things: government accountability, transparency, and a voice in the decision-making process.

In my role as a legal intern, I was galvanized to help these advocates through drafting memos, making requests, researching the statutes, or speaking out on their behalf in a public forum. I wrote a letter to the editor about high school civic education requirements that help ensure that our future citizens are knowledgeable about how their government operates. My research shed light on process-based issues like levying taxes and awarding contracts, so that citizens were better able to understand the complex legal issues in their communities. Throughout the experience, it was inspiring to hear their stories, research their issues, and take their message

to the public by advocating for a fair and equitable process. I realized that the people are an important part of the equation, and that while CAC is a staunch advocate for the people, without these citizen advocates, there would be no CAC.

CAC is founded on the principles that everyone should be treated equally and given a fair voice in government policymaking decisions. I learned that while I did not agree with each viewpoint that I encountered in my diverse interactions over the summer, each of us has a right to contribute. We all have opinions, viewpoints, and ideologies that we hold dear to us, and CAC is a place that works hard to ensure that all individuals and groups are respected and heard.

I used to think that “building democracy” was just a saying at CAC. I now know that it is the blueprint for everything CAC does and a unique way to summarize the mission of the organization. I am proud to have been involved with this work, even if just for a fleeting ten week internship. I look forward to taking the lessons and skills I have developed this summer into my legal career.

Before coming to the Citizen Advocacy Center, my familiarity with local government was limited to the television show *Parks and Recreation*. For those familiar with the show, it is a surprisingly accurate representation of local politics and highlights the importance of municipal government. Throughout this summer, I have come to understand the vital role the community plays in holding officials accountable. I also learned about the role CAC plays in promoting transparency and open government.

I enjoyed attending multiple city council meetings including Elmhurst City Council and committee meetings each Monday. I had never attended a city council meeting before this summer, and I was unaware how they operated. I was pleasantly surprised to see how much community engagement occurs, and the active contributions citizens make each week. I gave public comment my second week on the job. In my comment, I encouraged the council to post information on their website prior to scheduled meetings so the public has access to and can review the same information as the public officials.

Working with the Citizen Advocacy Center far exceeded any expectations I had for my first legal internship. Each morning I was welcomed and inspired by an environment where individuals encouraged one another, while also working hard to provide meaningful assistance to those seeking help from CAC. Coming to the office each day reminded me of the reasons I decided to pursue a career in law, and reinvigorated my passion for working as an advocate.

At CAC I worked on high-impact and exciting projects related to government transparency and efficiency. My first



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KATHLEEN TUNINK, RISING 2L,
University of Iowa College of Law

One project I worked on analyzed the different types of relationships a municipal attorney can have with the municipality where he or she is employed. I learned there are four different forms of local government, and each form impacts the relationships with the attorney. The main purpose of this project was to determine whom the attorney could represent and when outside counsel could be obtained by elected or appointed officials. This project gave me the opportunity to learn more about local government laws and codes and the impact on officials' roles in government.

I also researched a question about the Open Meetings Act. The statute requires an agenda be posted 48 hours before a meeting at the location of the meeting or online. I learned that

this requirement means the agenda must be posted for 48 continuous hours; not for 48 business hours. This difference impacts people seeking the information physically posted by restricting the hours it can be viewed. Before this internship, I did not know about all the requirements of local government meetings or the Open Meetings Act. It was rewarding to learn about the regulations on public bodies through the Open Meetings Act and the Freedom of Information Act and participate in monitoring the Chicago area.

The practical experience I gained at CAC has helped me apply the skills I learned in law school in a way I never anticipated. I will take everything I learned back to class with a greater understanding of the law.

task was to update a legal brochure that detailed the Illinois Freedom of



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KELSEY WEYHING, RISING 2L,
IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law

Information Act. This project helped me to gain experience communicating complicated legal concepts in plain, understandable terms.

I also performed research related to integrating township tax assessors into their respective county assessment offices. An individual in Lake County was interested in whether this type of consolidation could make government more efficient and save citizens' tax dollars. My research involved a survey of consolidation efforts in the Midwest and other notable states. I drafted Freedom of Information Act requests

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that were sent to assessment offices in seventeen Illinois counties that do not operate under the township system. Later, I compared the amount of money spent per parcel in these counties to the amount of money spent per parcel by township offices in Lake County.

In a third project, I analyzed sexual assault prevention policies at Illinois public universities. Through this research, I found that underreporting of sexual assault crimes at Illinois universities poses a serious challenge

to prevention and progress. However things are beginning to change. Within the last few years, some universities have implemented programs that focus on training “bystanders” as partners in the prevention of sexual assault.

Finally, my internship provided me with a unique opportunity to communicate with citizens who share differing perspectives. For example, I attended several meetings on the topic of campaign disclosure. Participating in these meetings certainly added nuance to my understanding of the issue of campaign finance and its

impact in Illinois. These experiences have expanded my worldview, further developed my political thinking and opinions, and inspired me to continue working as an advocate for the democratic process at the local, state, and federal levels of government.

I am grateful to CAC for giving me the opportunity to have a positive impact on local communities while helping me to develop the skills necessary to succeed in the legal profession.

My time at the Citizen Advocacy Center has been a most rewarding experience. The ideas I absorbed about community relations, local government, and transparency were the most impactful things that I learned. I enjoyed attending forums and debates, and writing letters to the editor about neighborhood concerns. As a result, I am more socially aware and cognizant of the commonality of problems in different cities across the United States.

The projects I worked on solidified the educational foundation I received in law school and gave me the opportunity to apply my legal education to real life situations. Two of my assignments involved the First Amendment: students’ and teachers’ rights to petition within the schoolhouse and public employees’ right to campaign on campus during off-hours. These projects were exciting to work on because it built upon research that I completed in a First Amendment class.

I learned that being an active member in the community really makes a difference. CAC taught me how to be involved in my community at the most fundamental level. I learned how



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JUMEKA WILSON, RISING 3L,
Ohio Northern University College of Law

to keep municipalities accountable, request public records, and interpret state statutes. I have learned how to be the first line of defense for myself and my community. I am enthusiastic to apply these skills at home and start positively effecting change in my own community.

This internship gave me the chance to network and learn from other professionals. I received advice on how to obtain employment and tips on interview skills. I had the pleasure of dialoguing with a former Attorney General, in-house counsel for a large corporation, authors, and other professionals. I was even fortunate to connect with an out-of-state professional who is employed in the state where I wish to practice law.

CAC reminded me that there are other ways to practice law outside of the conventional areas of practice. And, I have walked away with knowledge that translates across all fields.

This summer reinforced my strengths. I am more confident in my ability to provide thoughtful and thorough services. I understand the need for a solid education that includes civic education. I learned how to see things through a different lens and effectively problem-solve. I increased my understanding of client relations. I have improved my legal skills, particularly writing and analytical skills.

Working in such a positive environment was instrumental to my growth. Each staff member was supportive, encouraging, and provided constructive criticism of my work in a non-intimidating way. The fundamental skills I gained are crucial to becoming a successful agent of change. I recommend CAC to anyone who wants to make a difference in their community or understand how the law actually works.

See **WILSON** continued on page 5

My time at CAC has definitely prepared me to be a tireless advocate for democracy. I appreciate how CAC has challenged me, and I am grateful for everything I learned. This experience has motivated me to become a more informed citizen. I hope that I have made as lasting an impression on CAC, as it has made on me.



“I learned how my local government bodies govern citizens through laws and policies and therefore directly impact me and my family.”

REBECCA KAPLAN, Rising 2L,
University of Michigan Law School

The Citizen Advocacy Center taught me an incredible amount about local government and also what it means to be a lawyer.

Before this summer, I had little knowledge about DuPage County government even though I’ve lived in DuPage County my entire life. During my time as a legal intern I witnessed local government in action. I wrote memos about the filing of amicus briefs in the Illinois Supreme Court and lower courts. I attended meetings of the DuPage County Board and Milton Township, where I gave public

comment about making meeting agendas more accessible online. I learned about the relationship of local government to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and Open Meetings Act (OMA) through the PAC determination letter project, in which I reviewed and analyzed determination letters issued by the Public Access Counselor’s Office in response to alleged violations of FOIA and OMA for a searchable database. I learned how my local government bodies govern citizens through laws and policies and therefore directly impact me and my family.

At CAC I also had the opportunity to research pressing legal issues, familiarize myself with relevant Illinois law, and discuss these matters with citizens and my supervisors. For instance, I researched whether press releases, websites, and Facebook pages that reported defamatory statements would be protected by fair report privilege, which protects those who republish allegedly defamatory statements from defamation liability. For another example, I researched whether a confidentiality statement could be enforced, and if so, what would be the consequences of violating such an agreement.

As a CAC intern, I not only learned what it means to be a lawyer and an advocate, but I also learned to be a better citizen.

Born and raised in the Chicago suburbs, I grew up observing the all-too-familiar secrecy and corruption unfortunately prevalent in Illinois politics. When choosing a Public Interest Law Initiative Graduate Fellowship after graduating law school, I believed that working at the Citizen Advocacy Center would be an excellent opportunity to help people engage with their government and advocate issues of public importance. However, once I started working I realized that CAC not only helps people engage with their government at the state and local levels, but it encourages good government through transparency and accountability.

From the beginning, I was able to interact with citizens and research important legal issues. For example, I researched issues related to the Freedom of Information Act and the Open Meetings Act that impacted the ability of local residents to interact and receive information from their governments. Additionally, I helped craft resources that provide citizens with information on how to form a nonprofit corporation or file a court case on their own.

One important issue I worked on involved assisting a citizen with advocating for staffing on the Judicial Inquiry Board, an administrative agency that investigates allegations



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GREG TSONIS, Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI) Graduate Fellow, University of Chicago Law School

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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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of corruption. The agency has been understaffed for years, impacting its ability to handle an increased caseload. As a Legal Fellow at CAC I was able to sit down and speak with the concerned citizen as well as research legal options for advocating and implementing improvements regarding staffing at the agency. Additionally, a letter to the editor that I wrote to the Springfield

Journal-Register advocating for staffing the Judicial Inquiry Board was published!

My work at CAC this past summer has impacted me in multiple ways. Not only did it provide an opportunity to use and sharpen my legal skills, but it provided the rewarding experience of hands-on collaboration with local residents

trying to implement improvements in their communities and governments. This summer has taught me that informed and engaged citizens—interacting with their government, advocating for transparency, and urging accountability—promote the values of good governance and strengthen our democratic ideals.

The Citizen Advocacy Center relies on donations to support our work.
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