For Immediate Release
November 21, 2016

LOCAL CITIZENS RECEIVE CITIZEN INITIATIVE AWARD FROM
CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER FOR COMMUNITY ACTIVISM AND
BEING CATALYSTS FOR DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

ELMHURST – On December 7, 2016 Citizen Advocacy Center (CAC) will recognize its 2016 Citizen Initiative Award recipients. Since 1997 CAC has recognized local community activists and community groups who are catalysts for democratic participation and use civic, legal, and community organizing tools to advocate for a self-identified issue of public concern. “Recipients of the Citizen Initiative Awards are those who have identified an issue of public concern and have taken it upon themselves to organize, advocate, and make a difference in their communities. They care about their communities and are engaged. While some government entities welcome informed civic engagement, others may be less inviting of those who question government decision-makers and who are often labeled as troublemakers or disruptive. The CAC award recognizes the essential and unique role these individuals play in a participatory democracy. Because of their activism, democracy thrives, even in the face of adversity,” said Ms. Maryam Judar, CAC’s Executive Director.

The presentation ceremony will be held at 6:30 p.m. on December 7, 2016 at the Citizen Advocacy Center, 182 N. York St. in Elmhurst. It is open to the public and free of charge with a $10 suggested donation. Those interested in attending can call CAC at 630-833-4080 or email CAC@CitizenAdvocacyCenter.org to reserve a space.

The 2016 Citizen Initiative Award recipients are:

Ixchel, Cicero and Berwyn

Ixchel is a community group founded by Cicero and Berwyn women of color who are community residents, graduates of local schools, or have children enrolled in Cicero District 99. Ixchel is being recognized for the positive impact it has made in Cicero District 99 with respect to advocating for equitable education.

Co-founder Ms. Delia Barajas has been a passionate civic participant in Cicero since 2009. Ms. Barajas and other community members formed Ixchel after monitoring the public elementary school district and seeing a need to help advance equitable education, including adequate and legally sufficient bilingual education. Ixchel has doggedly pursued education plans and test results, and seeks school district accountability with laws. Through working with CAC, Ixchel has learned how federal, state, and local laws apply to school district programs for English language learners, and its members became more knowledgeable to better advocate for children’s needs in Cicero and Berwyn. Ixchel also addresses systemic racism as a root cause of inequities for communities of color and organized around environmental justice issues to improve the quality of life for students and their families. One measure of their success was in the
Fall of 2015 when they successfully organized Cicero community residents to demand that the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency hold a Public Meeting on the Proposed Revision of a Construction Permit for Metropolitan Biosolids Management. As a result, they were able to lower 47% of sulfur dioxide emissions in their community.

Karen Jump, Northbrook

Ms. Jump is being recognized for her undeterred advocacy efforts to maintain protected open space within unincorporated Cook County from development. In a grueling process over a two year period that includes ongoing litigation, Ms. Jump has: founded the nonprofit, Mission Hills Openlands, to further community organizing efforts to preserve open land; sought to keep herself informed about the project through use of the Freedom of Information Act; speaks out regularly and questions compliance with environmental and zoning laws at dozens of public meetings through her First Amendment rights; and keeps others informed. The primary issue is to what degree the open space is protected by restrictive covenants.

A contentious community issue, seven homeowners associations filed a lawsuit against Cook County and the developer, and Ms. Jump regularly informs community members of the latest update through online postings and regularly sending e-newsletters to subscribers that provide actual public documents pertaining to the article. Additionally, Ms. Jump has reached out to local, state, and federal regulatory agencies and officials to help the residents advocate for their viewpoint. For example, Ms. Jump successfully lobbied her representatives in the Illinois General Assembly to write and urge the developer to voluntarily enter the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency’s Site Remediation Program. Ms. Jump is recognized for the impact a determined citizen can have to raise public awareness about contentious community issues and holding government entities accountable.

Jean Kaczmarek, Glen Ellyn

Ms. Kaczmarek is being recognized for her tireless efforts since 2005 to advocate for good government ethics within the DuPage County Board, the DuPage County Forest Preserve, and the DuPage County Election Commission, including the pursuit of increased transparency, accountability, and efficiency.

Ms. Kaczmarek has utilized the Freedom of Information Act, the Open Meetings Act, ethics laws, procurement laws, election laws, and others to comprehensively monitor DuPage County government bodies. Issues that Ms. Kaczmarek has raised over the years include the destruction of public records policy at the DuPage County Election Commission, and the County Board posting inadequate public notice of raises for DuPage County elected officials’ salaries at a meeting to be held after a long holiday. Ms. Kaczmarek’s advocacy that adequate notice was not provided to the public because of the holiday was instrumental in the County Board postponing the vote on their own raises. Additional issues Ms. Kaczmarek has spoken out on includes: conflicts of interest by local electoral board members; over-inflated elected government official salaries; and poor lobbying transparency laws. Ms. Kaczmarek is a vocal proponent for consolidating the DuPage County Election Commission and County Clerk’s offices to increase efficiency within DuPage County Government and has long criticized the appointment process of DuPage County Election Commissions for lacking sufficient transparency.
She has also questioned the proportionality between the duties of DuPage County Election Commissioners and their annual salaries.

Most recently, Ms. Kaczmarek successfully advocated for an amendment to the DuPage County Election Commission’s Ethics policy to include a prohibition for attorneys working for the election commission from making campaign contributions to candidates for elected offices within the election commission’s jurisdiction.

**Don Mitchell, Westchester**

Mr. Mitchell is being recognized for his initiative and resolve as a watchdog in Westchester, where he has used the Freedom of Information Act, Open Meetings Act, and his First Amendment rights to hold village trustees accountable.

A retired nurse, Mr. Mitchell took an interest in local government when he learned the village board had placed a referendum for home rule on the ballot. He contacted CAC to learn about home rule and his rights to participate in local government matters, outside of the quintessential civic act of voting. Mr. Mitchell was at first intimidated to be politically active, concerned that the village’s solicitation ordinance would prevent him from talking with community members. CAC worked with him and the village to ensure understanding of his First Amendment rights to canvass his neighborhood and organize neighbors to learn more about home rule without fear of reprisal from the government.

Residents in the community defeated the home rule referendum. Mr. Mitchell has continued to monitor the village government and be a source of information for neighbors, especially when the village placed a referendum on the next election’s ballot asking the residents to raise the limiting tax rate to increase revenue. Mr. Mitchell has further questioned what is appropriate election activity for an elected official when a referendum is on the ballot.

***

The Citizen Advocacy Center is a 501(c) (3), non-profit, non-partisan, community-based legal organization with a mission to build democracy for the 21st century. Recognition by CAC is not in any way an endorsement of any individual who is or may become a candidate for public office. Founded in 1994, CAC strengthens the citizenry’s capacities, institutions, and resources for self-governance. For more information about CAC or to make a contribution, visit us at [www.CitizenAdvocacyCenter.org](http://www.CitizenAdvocacyCenter.org).

###