

Citizen Advocacy Center

2023 Summer Intern

Projects List



Founded in 1993, the Citizen Advocacy Center (CAC) is a community-based legal advocacy organization. Community lawyers work with individuals, community groups, lawyers doing pro-bono work, students, and volunteers to take matters of public concern to City Hall, the street, to the airwaves, to the electronic networks, and to the courts. The CAC's mission is to build democracy for the 21st century by strengthening the citizenry's capacities, resources, and institutions for self-governance. CAC trains individuals and community groups in how to use the law and democratic participatory tools to address self-identified issues of public concern through providing individual assistance, educational brochures, workshops, and monitoring government entities, as well as improves democratic protocols from the local to statewide level.

CAC offers internships year-round that provide students of all levels with a variety of practical experiences focused on learning how government really works. CAC has hosted high school student interns from throughout the western suburbs and college and law student interns from dozens of schools throughout the United States. Interns work on projects relevant to their skills and under the supervision of a community lawyer. As a community legal organization, CAC provides law school interns with a unique experience. Legal interns investigate and analyze questions and reports of what appear to be violations of the law related to accessing the democratic process, undemocratic public policies, and obstacles to civic participation and more. In addition to working with a community lawyer, legal interns meet community leaders, public officials, practicing lawyers, and develop traditional legal skills such as research, writing, and analysis. Legal interns also develop "law plus" skills that are not taught in law school: making sense of state statutes and local codes as applied to real cases, documenting facts, making government and the law work for the people, making requests for government information, conducting interviews, public speaking, and more.

During the summer internship program, CAC typically hosts three to six law students who participate in a ten-week program, the culmination of which is Democracy Night where interns present to the CAC community.

The attached list is a sampling of some of the issues legal interns will work on in 2023. For more information, visit CAC's website at www.citizenadvocacycenter.org.

Answering Public Inquires: Real People. Real Issues

On a routine basis, CAC receives inquiries from concerned citizens asking about how to be active and engaged on issues of public concern rooted in their community. What can an individual say during public comment at a government meeting? Is a permit needed to hold a protest? How can someone request public information? How can a community group put an issue on the ballot for voters to vote on? Supervised by a community lawyer, interns receive hands-on experience in conducting interviews, assessing solutions, and helping community members organize and understand the relevant laws.

Local Government Audits

Understanding how government entities implement policy is critical to identifying reforms. CAC routinely audits how public bodies comply with various laws related to government transparency, accessibility, and accountability. Interns implement audits, analyze the results, work with community lawyers to draft best practices, and distribute the results to the general public, government bodies surveyed and state legislators. Legal interns may also draft an article for publication in a journal. CAC audits have been pivotal to legislative reforms. Visit the CAC website to learn about previous topics.

Educational Brochures

The CAC has more than 30 educational brochures that educate the public about important laws impacting citizens everyday. Interns update current brochures and create new brochures on complex legal issues. To view current educational brochures, visit the CAC's website.

Democracy Workshops

CAC hosts community programs that provide education, training, and resources to the general public and government entities, as well as stimulate community discussion on issues of public significance. In 2023, CAC's workshops will focus on strengthening local government institutions by conducting 101 civic engagement seminars on how to organize community campaigns, use of the Freedom of Information and Open Meetings Acts, and the boundaries of the First Amendment. Workshops will also include convening diverse groups to help create a "Diagnostic Democracy Fitness Plan" that government bodies and community members can use to assess baseline elements of a healthy, democratic community.

Policy Research Briefing, Legal Research Briefing & Case Law Briefing

CAC has a variety of legal issues to investigate that range from the state to national level related to government operations, lobbying, ethics, and elections and more. Briefing is key to issue spotting, developing best practices for government entities, and organizing reform campaigns.

Litigation & Administrative Appeals

The CAC has argued cases in federal and state courts and has removed unconstitutional policies and practices at the local level. CAC has also submitted amicus briefs in federal and state courts and filed administrative appeals with the Illinois Attorney General Public Access Counselor on Freedom of Information Act and Open Meetings Act issues. While CAC views litigation as a last resort, law students actively participate in on-going CAC litigation.

Election Reform

The implementation of voting and the voter experience is decentralized, and happens at the individual county level. The CAC is interested in looking at what systems are in place to facilitate voting among the counties in the greater Chicagoland area and what changes can be made to improve the voter experience without the need to pass statewide legislation.

Automated License Plate Readers (ALPRs): Access to Information

More municipalities are contracting with vendors to use ALPRs. ALPRs are high-speed, computer-controlled camera mounted on street lights or police cars and are used to capture license plate numbers, location information, date and time. CAC is interested in investigating the policies local government use to retain and disclose information gathered by ALPRs.

Local Zoning Processes and Public Hearings

Local ordinances and state statutes focused on zoning and development allow government bodies to regulate how a community functions and what it looks like. The process of approving developments, what information the public has access to, and what the rights are of those who want to participate in the mix of public hearings and regular government meetings is complex and often contentious. CAC is interested in investigating laws, ordinances, and practices involved in zoning and development decision-making to identify best practices for meaningful citizen engagement.

Local Ethics Commissions and Prohibited Political Activity:

When the Illinois Ethics Act passed in 2003, it was considered landmark legislation. One provision requires units of local government to adopt a prohibited political activity provision and, on a discretionary level, create local ethics commissions. Now, 20 years later, CAC is interested in assessing how local government bodies have implemented the Ethics Act with respect to prohibited political activity and ethics commissions.

Redistricting at the Local Level

Redistricting impacts more than what public officials represents constituent groups at the state level. Redistricting also happens at the local level and has an impact on services provided to constituents. CAC is interested in how local redistricting impacts community members.