For Immediate Release
November 20, 2014

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

ELMHURST – On December 9, 2014 Citizen Advocacy Center (CAC) will recognize its 2014 Citizen Initiative Award recipients. CAC created the Citizen Initiative Awards in 1997 to recognize local community activists who are catalysts for democratic participation and have used civic, legal, and community organizing tools to advocate for a self-identified issue of public concern. “Those honored by CAC are dynamic in that they have identified a local issue of public concern and have taken action to organize community initiatives, advocate for greater accountability of public bodies, and make a difference in the communities in which they live. Often times these individuals are criticized by government officials as ‘troublemakers’, ‘agitators’, ‘uninformed’, and more. CAC identifies these individuals as inspirational because they embody what it means to live in a participatory democracy, and their dedication to addressing a community issue is strong, even in the face of adversity,” said Ms. Maryam Judar, CAC’s Executive Director.

The presentation ceremony will be held at 7:00 p.m. on December 9, 2014 at Cafe Amano, 116 E. Schiller 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 2014 Citizen Initiative Award Recipients are:

- **Batavia Rate Payers for Fair Electricity, Batavia (Kane County).** Batavia Rate Payers for Fair Electricity (BRPFE) is being recognized for their outstanding efforts to hold the City of Batavia accountable for fiscal concerns related to a Power Sales Agreement with the Northern Illinois Municipal Power Agency for electricity from the Prairie State Energy Campus (PSEC). Residents' questions went unanswered as to what exact information was provided to the city that lead them to believe the Agreement would protect rate payers from volatile energy prices but instead resulted in soaring construction costs, increased debt, and unstable electric wholesale costs. Utilizing FOIA, BRPFE spent countless hours reviewing copious documents that generated many questions including those about the consultant's role in the decision-making process, a last minute change in deadline for final commitment to the project, and the impact of coal quality on the investment. BRPFE organized residents, collected over 1,000 petition signatures,
and presented the petition to Batavia City Council calling for an investigation into the city’s power provider and demanding increased transparency around contractual terms. The City of Batavia responded by officially requesting the Attorney General (Consumer Protection Division) to investigate the contract to verify terms and disclosure fair to consumers.

- **Joan Metz, Indian Head Park (Cook County).** Ms. Metz is being recognized for her outstanding efforts in monitoring the Village of Indian Head Park and thereby bringing greater accountability to Village Board actions. Ms. Metz attends Village Board meetings and wrote a blog that comprehensively reviewed public comments made at the Village Board, the details of which were often omitted from Village Board’s meeting minutes. When the Village Board failed to televise meetings, Ms. Metz videotaped meetings and posted them to her blog and YouTube Channel. At first, the Village Board attempted to implement barriers to Ms. Metz tapings but then the Village began televising meetings itself. Ms. Metz also monitored the Village’s finances and questioned expenditures, such as a policy allowing the Village President to receive a salary for acting as the Liquor Commissioner and a supplemental healthcare policy that allowed for expense reimbursements in excess of $60,000. After Ms. Metz questioned the reasoning and fiscal impact of the benefits and salary, the Board voted to eliminate both after the next election. Ms. Metz’s continues to commendably monitor her local government.

- **Park Truth, Plainfield (Will County).** Park Truth is being recognized for their outstanding efforts in organizing community members to monitor Plainfield Township Park District by attending public meetings and questioning the stringing of contracts, hiring and contracting nepotism, expenditures that should have required Board approval, and qualifications of the newly hired Executive Director. They also addressed attempts to deter and squash public participation that included board members unabashedly playing tic-tac-toe during public comment, passing a public comment policy that limited First Amendment rights, and the removal of residents by police escort. Park Truth members also utilized FOIA to obtain information. When they disputed the Park District’s response, they turned to the Attorney General’s Public Access Counselor’s (PAC), for which the Park District website described the citizens as “a small group of radicals” who use the PAC review process to “possibly harass the Plainfield Park District Board for its decisions.” Park Truth used the information gathered and published and shared the information with the community so that they were made aware of the actions of the Board. During the time Park Truth engaged in their undeterred advocacy, the Executive Director resigned, offensive comments about the citizens were removed, the Board began investigating expenditures, and more. Park Truth’s continued advocacy and outreach also led to limited but groundbreaking legislation passed by the Illinois State Legislature that increased the Board size by two members to reduce the opportunity for a smaller majority to poorly dictate public policy.
• **Gerri Songer, Hawthorn Woods (Lake County).** Ms. Songer is being recognized for her tenacity in standing up to her Village Board about her right to seek documents and give public comment. She began attending Village meetings after seeing an increased presence of trains at all hours of the day and questioned what they were carrying. Through public records, she learned the trains were transporting toxic, hazardous, and explosive substances and her research showed that several of trains have met with accident and created hazardous runoff. Ms. Songer tried to address her public safety concerns to her Village Board. During her polite if forceful public comment, the Board had police removed Ms. Songer from the meeting. Ms. Songer was undeterred from attending subsequent meetings, asserting her rights, and continuing to speak out. Ms. Songer is also an educator and her experiences in civic participation have inspired her to teach high school students how to become participants in their democracy. Ms. Songer started the extracurricular “Students4Democracy” at Elk Grove High School, where she teaches. She has integrated into the curriculum how to utilize public participation tools like FOIA and the right to speak at open meetings of public bodies. Many of these students are first generation Americans and have not previously been exposed to democracy participation.

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).

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