**An Advocate’s Journey:**

**Affecting Policy from River Forest to Springfield and Back**

**Dominican University Graduate School of Social Work**

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The purpose of this project was to advocate for the inclusion of $100 million for Affordable Housing in the Illinois Capital Budget to help alleviate homelessness among low-income families in Illinois. A 2006 study led by the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) showed that 73,656 men, women, youths, and children were homeless in Chicago during the fiscal year 2006. The inclusion of this dollar amount in the capital budget would represent approximately 1600 single unit homes created or maintained in affordable price ranges, and the bonds distributed would serve as leverage for other sources of funding to help more families with financing.

The CCH supports the work of the Illinois Housing Development Authority (IHDA) which is an agency that promotes affordable housing in job rich areas of Illinois, however, funds are increasingly scarce. The appropriations would be made to IHDA and would be used to create new housing, maintain housing, and use funds as leverage to obtain other sources of funding in order to reach this goal. Historically, affordable housing has never been a part of an Illinois Capital Budget, and this would be the first time it would be included should the campaign succeed.

The class assignment, developed in collaboration with CCH, called for either an in district meeting with a legislator or participation in the NASW Advocacy day in Springfield. The group did a combination of both (See Appendix A). The group developed a letter for a House Representative and Senator for the University’s district and utilized a grassroots petition drive on campus to present to them. The team set up “homes” in high traffic areas of the school with blankets and signs asking to stop homelessness. This effort produced 153 signatures which were presented to Representative Deborah Graham and Senator Don Harmon with stellar results. Rep. Graham wrote and signed a letter to Speaker of the House Mike Madigan and Senator Harmon wrote to Senator Cullerton, President of the Senate, on the group’s behalf to include affordable housing in the budget. In addition, each group member created similar letters and petition campaigns asking their local legislators to take action on the topic. These letters and petitions were presented to the several of the legislators in Springfield as part of the NASW Social Worker Advocacy Day on February 25, 2009. For those the group could not meet face to face, petitions and letters were sent the next day or left in their offices.

This strategy worked well, and each legislator met allowed the group to fully develop their topic. The legislators commented on the group’s preparedness, organization, and follow up. The group was able to get written support from 4 of the 6 legislators contacted. As an update, at a community meeting with Governor Quinn where the issue was raised again as part of a multi-coalition presentation, he agreed to regular community meetings and agreed to let the coalitions review the Capital Budget once before it is signed (something that has never been done before). At the time of this writing, the Governor agreed to $125 million in the Capital Budget with $100 million from Federal Stimulus Funds and $25 million from the State. CCH and other advocacy groups continue to push for a match of the Federal amount before the May 31st deadline.

There are many ways to affect policy. The group learned that legislators rely on lobbyists and advocates to provide them with the “cliff notes” version (fact sheets, personal stories) of many different important issues in order to make sound decisions on subjects they may not know enough about that will affect many people. Legislators are generalists, and advocates are the specialists for the various issues that affect the nation’s everyday lives. It is a duty to be informed of policy and how it affects every aspect of American life.

Appendix A

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| **Date** | **Action Taken** | **Comments** | **Results** |
| 1/26/09 | Group met with Hannah from CCH to learn about the organization and get debriefed on the issue. Tasks were assigned to group members to create a letter to the school’s legislators asking for in district meetings. | The expectation was to not get a meeting for several months, but with persistence, the meetings were scheduled within 30 days. | The group scheduled in district meetings several days before Advocacy Day with Rep. Graham, and several days after with Sen. Harmon. |
| 2/16/09 | Campus Wide Advocacy Week:  The group set up “homes” on campus asking for petitions from students and faculty. In addition, each group member asked professors for a few minutes in each class to present the topic and ask for signatures and support. | Professors were eager to let the students do this, but the campus wide activity was met with some opposition. They had obtained permission to be there, but in some spots were asked to take down their displays, homelessness makes lots of people uncomfortable when they have to actually see it. | The group gathered 153 signatures to present to Graham and Harmon. |
| 2/19/09 | Meeting with Rep. Graham: The group had 30 minutes to present the issue to Rep. Graham. Facts, the signatures, personal stories, and a solution were offered to the Rep. | This was a great experience. Rep. Graham was actually homeless herself at one point, and we soon realized she was a strong ally in this cause because of her personal experiences. | Rep. Graham agreed to write to Mike Madigan and asked the team to draft a letter which she then revised, signed, and sent to Mike Madigan. |
| 2/25/09 | NASW Social Worker Advocacy Day: The group went down to Springfield and attempted to meet each member’s local legislators face to face. Each member looked up their local representatives and printed their photos so they would be recognizable. The group asked to speak to each individually and formed a semi circle around them going through a carefully crafted agenda with personal stories and supporting facts. | This experience was energizing in that it took relatively little effort to affect changes by being focused and organized in our delivery and knowledgeable about the cause. It was important to be able to answer questions and anticipate what the legislators would need to know to make a decision. | From the class, this group had the most success meeting with legislators (6 in total face to face) and a total of 10 legislators were contacted in one form or another. All but 2 legislators agreed to support the cause. The 2 who did not asked for follow up after the preliminary budget would be released so they could make a decision that suited their constituents. |
| 3/2/09 | Meeting with Senator Don Harmon: The Senator was eager to meet with us because he needed some key information on this issue in order to make a decision. | We were told by CCH that Senator Harmon was a key player that we would need in order to push this through. It was exciting to meet with him because he seemed genuinely interested in what we had to offer. | The Senator agreed to write to Senator Cullerton in support of adding $100 Million to the Capital Budget for Affordable Housing. |
| 3/29/09 | Community Meeting with Governor Quinn: 4 Coalition Groups, one which included CCH held a televised community meeting and panel presentation with Governor Quinn about various issues. Affordable Housing in the capital budget was a main point for this meeting, however many different issues were presented which dealt with the different facets of poverty. | This was perhaps one of the more exciting moments, because the Governor directly presents the budget. The cause went from $0 to $25 Million from the State and $100 Million from the Federal Stimulus. The result on the face appears to be more than what was asked, but once the stimulus money is not there, only $25 Million would remain in the budget which is hardly enough to make a difference. There is still work to do, and still time to do it before the deadline. | The Governor agreed publicly to meet regularly with the community to discuss relevant issues. The Governor agreed to allow the coalitions to view the Capital Budget in a community meeting one final time before it was decided upon on May 31st (This has historically never been done before according to the coalitions). The Governor was receptive to the community’s needs and include $125 Million in the Capital Budget, however $100 Million come from the Federal Stimulus Package, and CCH is continuing to push for the Governor to match that amount with State Funds (which would bring the total to $200 Million for this year, but would still mean $100 million from the State for subsequent Years versus the $25 million currently proposed.) |
| 4/20/09 | Class Presentation: The group presented its work to the class via PowerPoint. | When everything was said and done, the professor said we had gone above and beyond the expectations of the assignment. It was a good feeling especially since we helped make some tangible progress. | Other people learned about our cause and helped us to achieve our goal. |
| 4/28/09 | Podcast Presentation: Two reps from the group presented the PowerPoint to the Graduate School of Social Work (Which was Podcast and available for viewing upon request.) | This was also an exciting moment because the group was able to reach a wider audience with the cause and educate fellow students about advocacy. | After the presentation, several audience members approached us and thanked us for giving good tips on how to be an advocate and for the interesting presentation. It is hoped that this resulted in more people becoming interested in advocacy as a civic duty. |