



Community Advocacy Institute

GRADUATION CEREMONY

MAY 25, 2021, 6 PM

Welcoming Remarks from the Community Action Board

Tiffany Jones, CAB Chair

Remarks to the Graduates

The Honorable Marc Elrich, Montgomery County Executive

The Honorable Jheanelle Wilkins, Maryland House of Delegates

Members of the Montgomery County Council

Dr. Raymond Crowel, Montgomery County DHHS Director

Presentation of CAI Graduates

Lisette Engel, CAB Vice Chair

Closing Remarks

Sharon Strauss, Community Action Agency Executive Director



About the Community Advocacy Institute

The Community Advocacy Institute (CAI) was created by the Community Action Board in 2016. The goal of the CAI is to teach lower-income County residents advocacy skills so that they can effectively advocate for their own communities. Participants attend monthly workshops about important advocacy topics, including the legislative process, storytelling, how to work with elected officials, and how to write testimony and letters of support. Participants also complete an advocacy project: testifying before County Council or submitting written testimony. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020-2021 program was the first to be conducted entirely online. In addition to the monthly workshops on Zoom, we were able to connect with each other and the board members more informally at virtual brown bag lunch sessions.

This year's graduating class is the fifth cohort to complete the CAI. The 18 graduates will now join the CAI alumni group, which includes the 66 graduates of the first four years of the program. CAI graduates remain connected to each other and the Community Action Board through quarterly workshops and regular communications regarding opportunities in the County.

2021 CAI Graduates

Sara Abdelkhalek	Sandy DeWine	Catherine Miller
Ayobami Akindele	Ramata Diop	Eneshal Miller
Sibyl Brown	Mariette Ghoumga	Kimberly Mouzon
Norma Columbus	Candra Hardy	Koko Njonjo
Amanda Dalton	Leslia Madrigal-Lázaro	Abdul Sesay
Ebony Delaware	Lucy Absi Lopez	Freida Williams

Personal Statements

The CAI graduates were asked to submit a brief personal statement highlighting what the CAI meant to them, what they plan to do with the skills they have learned, and what issues they will advocate for moving forward.

Sara Abdelkhalek

The CAI strengthened me and my professional advocacy work. It was a blessing to connect with like-minded colleagues and advocates who believe in social justice. During the CAI, I learned a lot about how to advocate for important issues such as affordable housing for low-income people. I plan to advocate for the Healthy Workplace Bill and the Federal EMPOWER Act. Thank you!

Ayobami Akindede

The CAI program was very impactful, and I was honored to be part of this year's program. All of the classes were informative and educational, and I always looked forward to the brown bag sessions because I knew I could learn from people like me who are selfless and give themselves to causes dear to their hearts. I will continue to advocate for culturally appropriate food and health access in my community.

Sibyl Brown

Participating in the CAI has been a wonderful experience to learn more about Montgomery County and how to advocate for my community. I plan on bringing the skills learned and connections made to my workplace, Shepherd's Table, to be an advocate for ending homelessness and hunger in our community! Shepherd's Table is currently establishing an advocacy program as well, so the lessons learned from CAI will help me lead this initiative and begin advocating for change at the local level.

Norma Columbus

The CAI is a supportive program that affords the opportunity for me to grow and learn effective ways to advocate for issues affecting the community. I plan to use the skills I have learned to network and work with local organizations to provide access to resources for persons in need. Lastly, the issue I would like to advocate for moving forward is better housing options for lower-income households.

Amanda Dalton

CAI gave me a network and roadmap to show me the way toward effective community activism. Teamwork is important to me so I would like to serve in a group where I can add my skills to the power of many others. I seek reforms that will lead to truly affordable housing in Montgomery County (FOR ALL RESIDENTS), social justice related to evictions and access to housing assistance, and solutions for homelessness caused by power-based violence.

Ebony Delaware

Being a part of the CAI has given me the push and courage I needed to start using the experience and knowledge I have to advocate for my community. Next, I will complete the Certified Financial Education Program by the National Financial Educators Council (NFEC) and work on developing a financial literacy program for youth and adults. Moving forward, I want to use my voice to advocate for equitable education and the importance of financial literacy.

Sandy DeWine

CAI training was interesting for learning more about the mechanics of conveying concerns to local government. A lot of things seem mysterious to the layperson and you wonder how things work and what's going on behind the scenes. I expect to express myself more on issues of concern to me via testimony, letter writing, etc. now that I've seen how to do it. I plan to advocate for the rights of pet owners, seniors, and tenants in rental housing.

Ramata Diop

For me the CAI was a ray of sunlight that lit my path on how to advocate for my community. I plan on advocating for early childhood education nationwide. The issue that I would like to advocate in the future will be the importance of parent engagement with schools.

Mariette Ghoumga

It was a privilege for me to be part of the CAI program. It allowed me to know different kinds of issues people in the community face every day. The skills I learned will help me better serve my community. I will advocate for children, especially for childcare.

Candra Hardy

I was honored to sit alongside many diverse people in Montgomery County who have the same passion to make life better for the citizens of our County. I learned about many services I didn't know about. I plan to continue to be of service and assist people who may have a hardship or need resources. I would love to continue advocating for the elderly, incarcerated women, and justice reform.

Leslia Madrigal-Lázaro

CAI has given me the opportunity to learn about advocacy. Every day when I am driving to work, I see a variety of things in which I could use my skills to create positive changes in the community. I would like to find ways to maintain a safe, clean, and healthy living environment in the County.

Lucy Absi Lopez

The CAI has helped me understand advocacy at a very elevated level and give voice to those who are unable to advocate on their own. It has also helped me to be more sensitive to people's needs and be more compassionate. I will use the skills I have learned to be more effective when advocating for a particular issue or for a group of people. I plan to learn more and advocate for educational issues within the immigrant community.

Catherine Miller

Being a participant in the CAI allowed me to explore different avenues and build on new relationships toward advocacy. I would like to continue my work advocating for reentering citizens who are getting out of jail or shelters or were formerly homeless. I want to advocate for programs that support mental health court.

Eneshal Miller

The CAI has been a phenomenal experience and has meant so much to me. I plan to continue my advocacy work operating a nonprofit that provides a clear path for our homeless, very low-income, and people with disabilities. Moving forward, I plan to advocate for a guaranteed income model and help residents understand the importance of civic education, financial literacy, self-awareness, and self-management.

Kimberly Mouzon

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the CAI, which served as a blueprint for how to advocate for County residents and present ideas to the County Council. The workshop presenters and board members were instrumental in providing resources and guidance. I will take what I have learned and present an idea or community need to the County Council. I will continue to be an olive branch to individuals and families in my community who need help and resources.

Koko Njonjo

I have always loved to put myself in other people's situations and feel their pain, but this has been a challenge for me, as I have always been unable to speak out. Thanks to the CAI, I can now speak out for both myself and others. I plan to advocate for those who are unable to speak for themselves and I would like to advocate for women who face challenges because they have children with disabilities.

Abdul Sesay

The basic advocacy skills taught by the CAI have been eye opening in helping me better understand the vital needs of County residents. I will continue to advocate and engage with County officials on relevant matters such as fostering equality, bridging the gap in the human race, and food insecurity. My key advocacy goal is to bridge the gap and promote culturally appropriate and relevant food in the food industry.

Freida Williams

Thank you to the Board members for your engagement with CAI participants. The CAI has given me the opportunity to learn and demonstrate effective advocacy. I plan to execute community-based networking opportunities and share testimonial stories of residents. I would like to advocate for critical services for seniors, disabled individuals, transition-age youth with mental health needs, and students enrolled in special education programs.