

Stronger Together

Developing Effective Advocacy Skills
and a Powerful Community Network

2026 Speak Up and Speak Out Summit



Agenda

- Becoming Advocates: Our Stories
 - Kaela Denny
 - Karthik Ramalingam
 - April Mcclees
- Preparing for Regional Leadership: Advocacy Mentorship Group
- Getting to Know My Region: Community Mapping

Becoming Advocates: Our Stories



Where My Advocacy Started

Learning to Speak Up

- Family taught me to stand up for myself
- Partners in Policymaking gave me knowledge
- Found a community that understood my experiences
- Built confidence to use my voice



Kaela Denny

Stepping Into My Own Advocacy Journey



My First Step Into Legislative Advocacy

- Met with my Illinois state senator
- Started by simply introducing myself
- Realized advocacy wasn't as intimidating as I thought
- Continued practicing and building confidence

My Lived Experience Is Advocacy

Sharing What I Know

- Started having my own table at disability resource fairs
- Parents began coming to me with questions
- Shared my experiences and connected people with resources
- Learned that lived experience is knowledge



My Background



- Personal experience with advocacy since childhood
- Bachelor's of Arts, Legal Studies, University of Illinois Springfield, 2019
- Partners in Policy Making Graduate – June 2019
- H&R Block Tax Preparer Certificate – 2024
- Presenter/Host at Going Home Coalition - 2026
- Strong community volunteer
- Empowering internships and work experience

Karthik Ramalingam

Advocacy participation

- Research Intern - Illinois Council on Developmental Disability
- Research Intern-paid - Lifelong Access
- Aide - Life Center for Independent Living, Bloomington
- Internship: Center for Independent Living, Mundelein



Community Volunteering & Employment



Community Volunteering

- Museum
- Lincoln Library/Museum in Springfield
- McLean County Bloomington Salvation Army

Employment

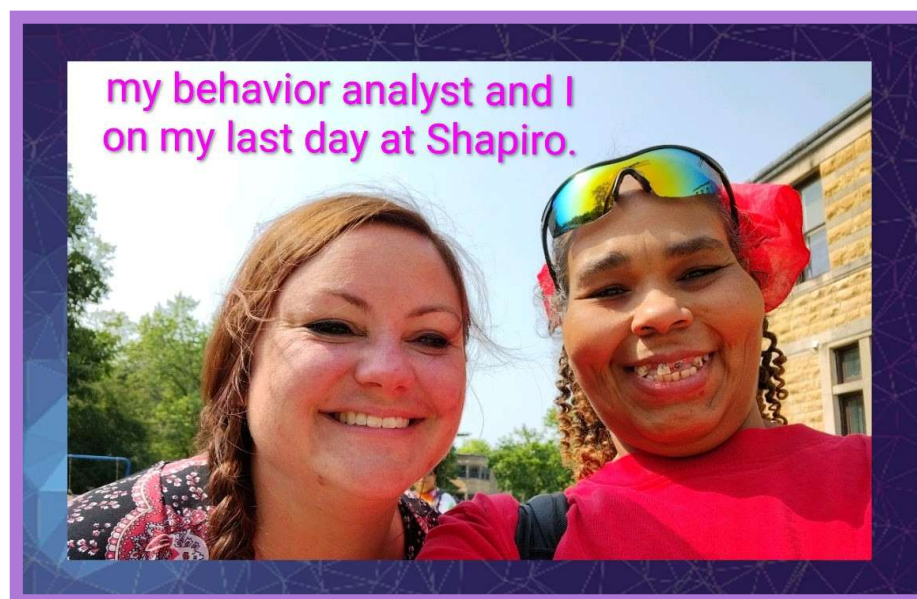
Internship - Damon W. Doucet, Attorney at Law, Skokie, IL

Internship - State Representative Carol Sente's office

Merchandise Associate, T J Maxx – Bloomington IL

The Start of My Journey

- Didn't believe my voice mattered
- Afraid to speak up
- Let others make decisions for me.
- SODC for about seven years
- Began learning about self advocacy as I worked toward community living



April Mcclees

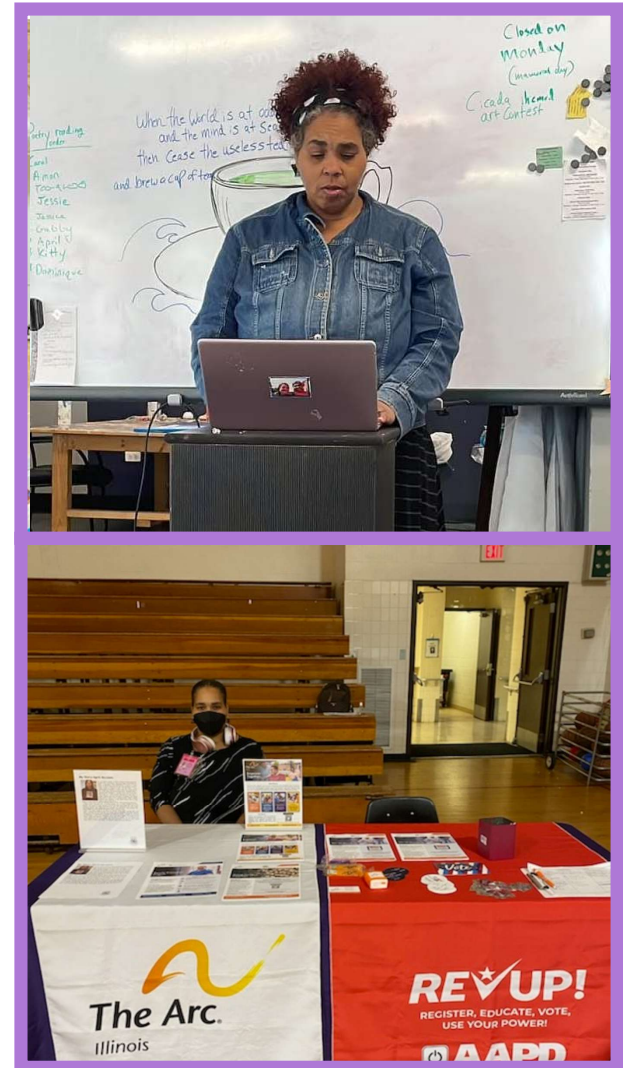
Goals Met and Skills Developed

- Returned to SODC after first transition attempt
Didn't give up!
- Had determination!
Received support and guidance
- Successfully transitioned back into the community!
- Earned my GED!
- Dream achieved: working at Goodwill!
- Discovered my purpose:
helping others find and use their voices



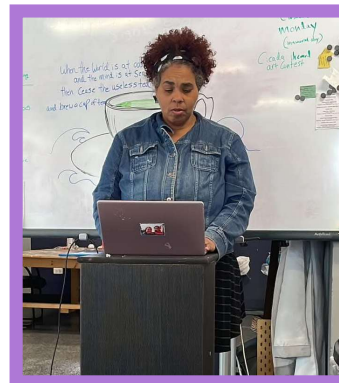
My Present

- Disability Rights Advocate, Speaker, Author
- Topics of Focus: disability rights, voting, leadership, inclusion, accessibility, self-advocacy, and the importance of community living
- Self-Advocate and Mentor with The Arc of Illinois
- Active member of REV UP Illinois and the Going Home Coalition.
- YouTube channel, Real Talk with April



Looking to the Future

- My mission: empower others
- My Story. My Voice. My Purpose.
- Please join me in creating lasting change
- It's never too late to start advocating

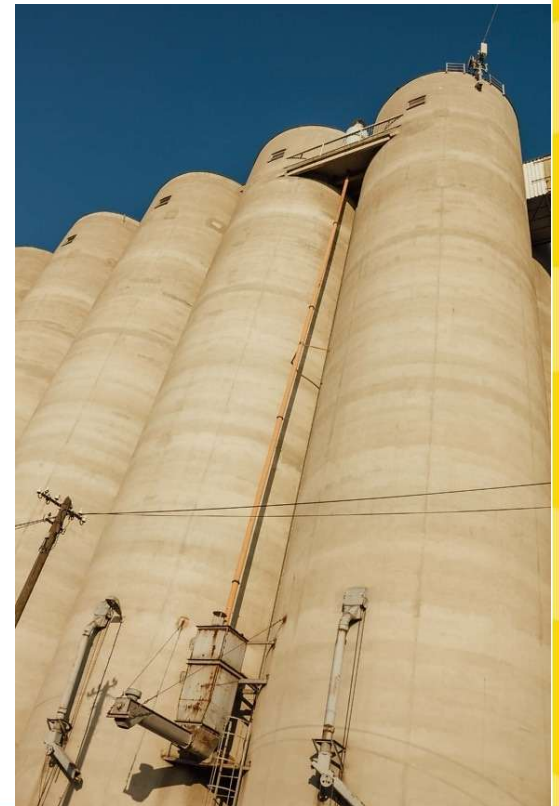


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Preparing for Regional Leadership: Advocacy Mentorship Group

Community Advocacy: The Challenge

- Real barriers we need to overcome: individual and community levels
- Illinois is large: people often aren't aware of barriers in other regions
- History shows us advocacy are more successful when we work together
- Let's improve communication, plan together, and coordinate efforts state-wide



Our Plan to Address the Challenge

- The Going Home Coalition's **Leadership Development Program** to launch in 2027
- **Equip Self-Advocates** to lead on the **regional level** and help develop **statewide communication network**
- The three of us are part of a **mentorship group** that's the **prototype** for the leadership program

Preparing for Regional Leadership: Advocacy Mentorship Group

Seminars:



History, System Structure, Political & Community Organizing,
Vision and Plan Development

Fieldwork

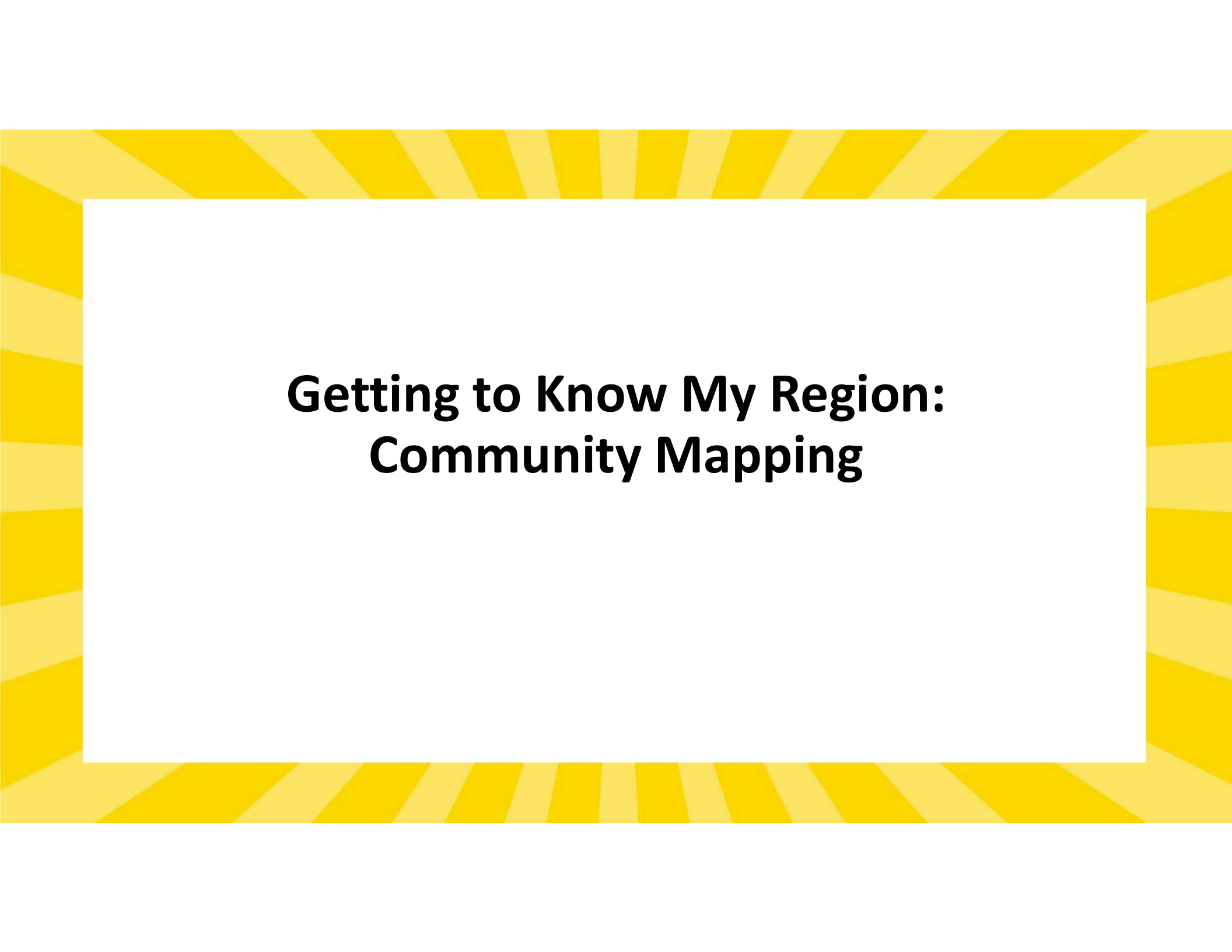


Community Mapping

After Graduation



Develop or get involved in regional level groups
Support communication in between regions and state level

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Getting to Know My Region: Community Mapping

Community Mapping: The Reason



Community mapping is a way to find local resources, groups, and perspectives that can help us live successful, meaningful lives

Maps can be made for an individual or a community

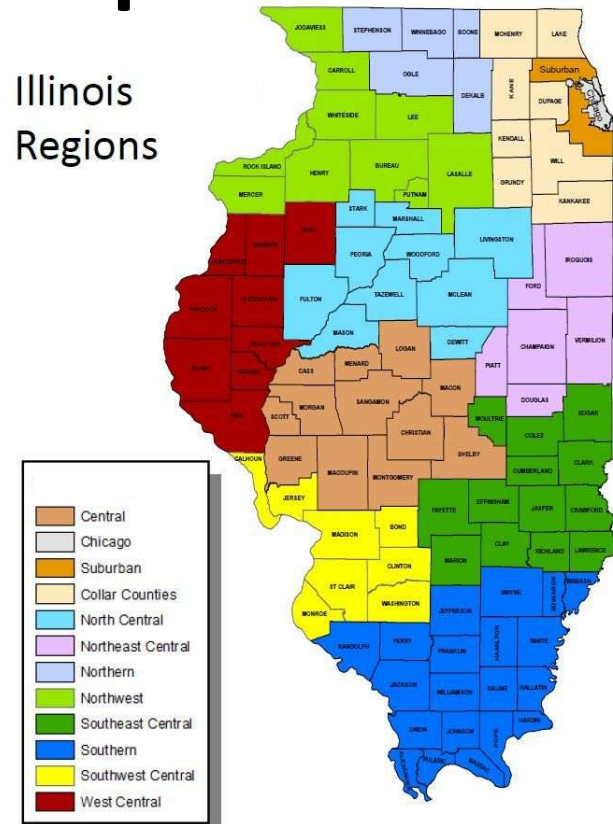
Community Mapping: Our Purpose

- Identify resources for the IDD Community Regions

IDD = intellectual and developmental disabilities

- Develop regions working together that are connected as a statewide network

Illinois
Regions



Our “Maps”

- Directory of resources and groups serving a specific region of Illinois
- Short overviews each organization
- Overview of local challenges or priorities
- Overview of service overlaps and gaps

Community resource	Address	Phone number	City	County	Website	Their purpose
Richton Park Public Library	22310 Latonia Ln.	(708) 481-5333	richton park	cook	/www.richtonparklibrary.org	educational recreational and i
ssra	19910 S 80th Ave	815 806 0384	frankfort square		ssra.org	
cornerstone services	777 Joyce rd	815 727 6666	joliet	will and Kankakee	https://www.cornerstoneservices.org/	they provide several diffrent s
goodwill	nation wide	312 563 1187			www.goodwill.org email programs@goodwillni.org	they provide several diffrent s
the arc of illinois	7550 183 rd st	815 464 1832	tinley park	cook and will	thearcofil.org	to provide support and offers r
surban access	900 maple ave	708 799 9190	homewood	cook	subacc.org	improving lives for people with

Please Join Us!

- Advocacy is done better together
- Advocacy and Leadership Development Opportunities:
 - The Leadership Development Program coming in 2027
 - Going Home Coalition Educational & Organizing Meetings
 - REV UP Illinois
- Fall Advocacy Day – November 17

Contact Us

For information about upcoming meetings, trainings, and events email:

Rio Goodwin Perez, Director of the Going Home Coalition
rio@thearcofil.org

