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Northern Illinois University's Project Flex Hosts On-campus Basketball Tournament for Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice Youth

DEKALB, IL – Last month, Northern Illinois University (NIU) hosted a basketball tournament for youth from each of the five [Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice](#) (IDJJ) youth centers. The tournament was organized by [Project FLEX](#) (Fitness, Leadership, EXperience), an initiative of the NIU College of Education's Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education. Project FLEX utilizes graduate students to provide rehabilitative sports and character development to youth in IDJJ's secure youth centers.

"What's so powerful about Project FLEX in particular is, yes, they're doing sports activities, but underlying all of that is really a focus on building life skills, setting goals, and working through frustrations," **said IDJJ Acting Director Rob Vickery**. "This was a culminating event where the youth were able to apply all those skills."

The five teams from IDJJ's Illinois youth centers were from Chicago, Grafton, Harrisburg, St. Charles, and Warrenville, with each team having between five and seven youth. Youth were chosen for the IDJJ teams based on a record of good behavior, staff recommendations, and an interest in participating in the tournament.

Student volunteers from NIU were recruited by Project FLEX to check in pre-approved guests, referee games, serve a catered luncheon, and cheer for the teams. Several teams of NIU students also participated in the early part of the competition to determine seeding for the youth centers' tournament bracket.

"We're trying to provide these real-world experiences for the kids – these realistic opportunities that they would have if they weren't incarcerated," **said Dr. Zach Wahl-Alexander, associate professor of kinesiology at NIU and co-founder of Project FLEX**.

IDJJ staff served as coaches for the teams, holding practices for the weeks leading up to the tournament and working to obtain uniforms and shoes for each tournament participant. Approximately 45 members of the IDJJ staff attended the tournament to coach, cheer, assist, and ensure safety protocols remained in place. Tommie Meyers, who manages several travel basketball teams in the Chicago area, donated 20 pairs of basketball shoes for youth who needed them.

"It was cool to see some of them just zoom out of being an incarcerated person and just feel like a normal kid, and I think it was the exact opportunity where they got to feel like a high school kid for the first time," **said Dr. Jenn Jacobs, associate professor of kinesiology at NIU and co-founder of Project FLEX**. "Rob Vickery and the IDJJ staff are just visionaries, and it takes courage to say yes to things that have not been done before."

"While the games themselves were exciting, the true significance of the event lays in its power to bring people together in pursuit of a shared goal – basketball just happened to be the catalyst," **said IDJJ Leisure Time Activities Supervisor St. Anthony Lloyd**. "I firmly believe that meaningful

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experiences have the power to shift perspectives. Outsiders will now see our youth as more than their past. IDJJ staff witnessed firsthand that positive outcomes are achievable when we work in unison. Most importantly, our youth will begin to believe that their current circumstances do not define their future – they can achieve and experiencing greatness.”

The [Phoenix Emerging Adult Career and Education \(PEACE\) Center](#) at St. Charles team won the tournament championship and returned to their youth center with a large trophy.

“We worked very hard to prepare for the tournament and showed dedication in order to make their mothers proud,” **said one youth on the St. Charles team.** When asked about his experience in the tournament, one youth participant from IDJJ’s PEACE Center at St. Charles stated, “I like the feeling of how everyone played together and played well, with no problems.”

“My favorite memory was a full court pass to one of my teammates for a bucket,” **said another youth on the St. Charles team.** “I felt like I was in high school playing for a high school team,” said a youth from the Pere Marquette team.

The tournament at NIU was the culmination of years of programming Project FLEX has led in IDJJ’s secure youth centers. Project FLEX and IDJJ began their partnership in 2018, when Project FLEX launched programming at IDJJ’s PEACE Center.

Project FLEX programming is designed to help young people develop positive habits for post-release success. Today, Project FLEX operates multiple programs in three IDJJ facilities, including a program that helps high school graduates at the PEACE Center become certified personal trainers.

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The [Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice \(IDJJ\)](#) was created by statute in 2006 with the mandate of safely housing and rehabilitating youth committed to its custody. The mission of IDJJ is to promote community safety and positive youth outcomes by building youth skills and strengthening families.

[Project FLEX](#) -Through evidence-based programming focused on physical and mental health, character development, career exploration, and higher education access, Project Flex aims to reduce recidivism rates and set youth up for success post-incarceration.

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