



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Run club for incarcerated youth celebrates first 5K run/walk

ST. CHARLES – On Saturday, April 25, nine youth in the custody of the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ) had their first experience participating in a 5K run/walk. The race took place on the secure campus of IDJJ's [PEACE Center](#) in St. Charles.

Professors Zach Wahl-Alexander and Jennifer Jacobs from Northern Illinois University's (NIU) Department of Kinesiology had the idea for the 5K after starting a run club for incarcerated youth at the PEACE Center earlier this year. The run club is a new addition to [Project FLEX](#), NIU's extensive programming partnership with IDJJ. Project Flex uses sports programming to make a positive impact on the lives of incarcerated youth.

Dr. Wahl-Alexander stated, "Just a few months ago, many of these young men didn't believe that they could run even one mile. Saturday, they completed the Project FLEX 5K. What made it possible wasn't just the training, but the community they built together as they held each other accountable."

Youth at IDJJ's PEACE Center ran alongside NIU graduate students who staff Project FLEX's weekly programming across IDJJ facilities. Youth runners were also joined by several IDJJ staff members, including IDJJ Acting Director Rob Vickery, St. Anthony Lloyd, leisure time activities supervisor, and Chaplain Nathan Wells.

IDJJ Acting Director Rob Vickery stated, "I am really proud of the youth who participated in the 5K. They dedicated themselves to training these past few months and pushed themselves to complete the race today. I'm grateful for the incredible work of Project Flex with youth at IDJJ. Their work is truly making a difference in the lives of young people who are learning how to be healthy and make good choices."

The first youth runner crossed the finish line at 25:12, with the final youth participant being cheered across the finish line at 51:59.

The race was supported by IDJJ and Project FLEX staff holding signs along the route and offering water to the runners. Project FLEX staff also provided a time clock, energetic music, and megaphone encouragement at the start and finish line. Participants and supporting staff enjoyed a cookout together following the race.

Dr. Jacobs stated, "Project FLEX is about more than sports, it's about creating real opportunities for growth and development. What we saw on Saturday was confidence being developed over time through a lot of hard work and support of one another. Moments like this show what's truly possible when young people are given something to work towards."

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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.





Healthy kids, strong families, safe communities

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