



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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I.G.N.I.T.E. PROGRAM HONORS FIRST GRADUATES

Uniontown, PA – Fayette County Jail officials celebrated the successful launch of their I.G.N.I.T.E. program with an inaugural graduation ceremony Tuesday.

A national initiative aimed at rehabilitating inmates and reducing recidivism, I.G.N.I.T.E. stands for “Inmate Growth Naturally and Intentionally Through Education.”

Founded in Genesee County, Mich., by Sheriff Chris Swanson, the I.G.N.I.T.E. program offers classes to enrolled inmates in which they can work toward a variety of goals, including:

- Earning credits toward a General Educational Development (GED) diploma;
- Learn a skilled trade via virtual reality;
- Completing enrichment courses in a myriad of subjects, from American Sign Language to financial literacy;
- And much more.

Deputy Warden Angela Kern said hosting a graduation just four months after moving into the new jail and three months after the program’s introduction “feels a little surreal.”

“It affirms that we are moving in the right direction to empower and enrich the lives of those in our care. It’s a 180. It’s motivating,” Kern said. “We are the first in Pennsylvania to join the I.G.N.I.T.E. movement, so there’s a sense of accomplishment just in leading the Commonwealth, with other counties’ eyes on us. How often does Fayette County get to say that in a positive spotlight? Inmates who wish to better themselves are now serving their time with purpose. Staff involved with I.G.N.I.T.E. are now working with purpose.”

The new Fayette County Jail is the first corrections facility in Pennsylvania to launch the National Sheriffs’ Association’s (NSA) I.G.N.I.T.E. Program. Sheriff James Custer, along with Warden John Lenkey, Deputy Warden Angela Kern and NSA representatives, held a ceremony marking the program’s historic launch just six weeks after the jail opened on McClellandtown Road in Uniontown.

Custer previously said the back-to-back changes made for “an exciting time” in Fayette County.

“I hope we can be a model facility and more county jails across Pennsylvania will become a part of I.G.N.I.T.E. I’m looking forward to many things, but I want to see how the inmates become engaged with the different components of the program and monitor their progress from there,” Custer said. “I’m also

looking forward to the long-term results of the program, which is ending generational incarceration and reducing recidivism in Fayette County.”

Kern said Custer’s hopes for the program have come to fruition ten-fold, with it now offering more than just tangible benefits for inmates and staff.

“Morale is lifted; hope is planted; encouragement is evident. I.G.N.I.T.E. participants are mentoring and tutoring each other on that housing pod,” she said. “Jail tears apart already broken people. We hope I.G.N.I.T.E. builds them up and illuminates for them their great worth.”

Tuesday’s ceremony saw 11 participants receive certificates for completing a wide catalogue of programming, including Steratore’s Janitorial/Sanitation Program; Financial Literacy (sponsored by United and Somerset Trust banks); Edwin’s Culinary Program; Drug and Alcohol; Religious Studies and much more.

The first group of Fayette County I.G.N.I.T.E. graduates included Brandon Adair, Jason Bell, Xavier Brown, Sylvester Conaway, Arthur Guty, Heather Hice, Jason Hice, Marvin Jones, Mark Lucic, Richelle Marilungo and Nicolas McDowell. Graduates were permitted to have one family member join them for the ceremony and celebration.

“They did not fly through this program or have an easy way out. They were required to give 16 hours of digitally stamped time per week to the program, which is essentially how much time a person would spend in a semester of college classrooms each week,” Kern said.

Since its original Michigan launch, I.G.N.I.T.E. has seen thousands of students complete more than 200,000 classroom hours, log more than 20,000 hours of coursework, and participate in more than 700 standardized tests nationwide.

When asked what she’s most looking forward to as the I.G.N.I.T.E. program grows locally, Kern said, “More!”

“More successes, more participants, more exciting opportunities for ‘Ignitees,’ she said. “We’re hoping for some big, second-chance employers to partner with us to provide training and skills, and then offer employment.”

Kern’s wish for “more” recently came true when the Private Industry Council (PIC) and Fayette County Community Action Agency “really came through” for the program by securing grant funding to reinstate the jail’s GED program.

“After COVID, agencies that previously provided the GED program in our facility let their funding go, or otherwise quietly bowed out. The GED is a jail staple; to me, it’s the very minimum in education that a facility should provide, yet no one that I reached out to would take it on,” Kern said. “PIC and Community Action kicked into high gear to bring us what we needed – and quickly.”

PIC provided the jail with a part-time GED teacher who will spend two days each week with not only I.G.N.I.T.E. participants, but any general population inmates who wish to earn their diploma. A second instructor will also offer the Career Pathways program, which teaches career readiness and skills three days per week.

Kern said Community Action is actively seeking additional grant funding to bolster Fayette County's Reentry Coalition initiatives, including education, resources and options for temporary residents.

The second session of Fayette County's I.G.N.I.T.E. program begins July 8. To learn more about the National Sheriffs' Association's I.G.N.I.T.E. Program, visit www.sheriffs.org/ignite.

To learn more about the Fayette County Jail, visit <https://fayettecountypa.org/797/Fayette-County-Prison-Project>.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.fayettecountypa.org.

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