



ALPENA COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Sheriff Erik W. Smith Undersheriff Cash J. Kroll

I.G.N.I.T.E. THE WAY

The Alpena County Sheriff's Department and IOSCO RESA are collaborating to pave the way for inmates under the new IGNITE program. IGNITE (Inmate Growth Naturally and Intentionally Through Education) was a program started by Genesee County Sheriff Chris Swanson. IGNITE is now a nationally recognized program in county jails across eleven states, and sponsored by the National Sheriff's Association.

The Alpena County Jail launched the IGNITE program on January 8, 2025. After seven weeks of running the program, Sergeant Christina Bednarski said she has seen a cultural shift in inmate behavior by restoring values, hope, and purpose. She stated, "Offenders have an opportunity to choose a path while incarcerated; you can choose to see jail as a punishment or as an opportunity to grow." Her hope is that the positive changes in behavior will continue beyond incarceration.

Inmates enrolled in IGNITE must participate in all courses offered to earn time off sentence, as well as incentives, throughout the program. Classes include Anger Management, Adult Crossroads, Workforce Development, and Nutrition; these courses are delivered by teachers Nicole Hatch (IRESA and Community Corrections), Mandi McDonald (IRESA) and Morgan Hardies (MSU Extension). IRESA also funded Orijin tablets offering GED, diploma and postsecondary classes. Other offerings are available, such as HVAC, engineering, plumbing, and electrical. For those in need of supportive services, the tablets have AA, The MasterPlan, The Only Person You Cheat is You, to name a few. Catholic Human Services provides necessary counseling for those with substance use challenges. In these 7 weeks, well over 1500 hours of combined instruction and time on tablets has earned inmates multiple certificates.

Researchers say that because IGNITE is led by law enforcement, it produces positive interactions between jail officials and inmates. Research also shows that offering inmates opportunities to better themselves reduces recidivism. Recidivism is when a person who has been convicted of a crime reoffends and goes back into the criminal justice system.

On March 6, The Sheriff's office and IOSCO RESA celebrated the inmates who participated in IGNITE for the full 7 weeks of programming. Individuals who have taken full advantage of this opportunity were rewarded with a ceremony, led by Sheriff Erik Smith, Undersheriff Cash Kroll, Jail Administrator Sergeant Christina Bednarski, and Adult Educator and IGNITE Coordinator, Nicole Hatch. Each hard working individual received a pizza party, pop, and some time to unwind by playing cornhole.

Sheriff Erik Smith offered, "With somewhere around 90% of our jail population returning to our community, we have to do a better job getting those individuals prepared to succeed upon release. If we are successful in changing the lives of a few people, it is worth the effort.

"Another positive result of this program is the behavior modification within our facility. When individuals are left with nothing to do, they tend to misbehave and that makes it tough on staff. If given the opportunity to engage in a positive learning environment, and the potential to make real life changes, they are easier to manage. I would rather have staff congratulating someone for their achievements, than disciplining them for poor decisions."

A few of the IGNITE participants had this to say:

Justin Slater expressed how the program has made a huge impact on him and his family. "I have learned how to create my own plan for success and achieve my goals thanks to the teachers and The Master Plan on the tablet. I have acquired the valuable skills that will help me in life and make me an invaluable employee, in my career path. Thanks to the program, I am able to cross off some of my goals and achieve certifications. Currently I have certifications in 11 different areas. All of the classes on the tablets and the live courses have boosted my confidence throughout the week. Nutrition, Workforce Development, and Crossroads, are truly amazing programs. I can honestly say that I have more skills now and a better understanding of myself. I believe I will be transformed upon my release. I will be a better man for myself, my family, and my community."

Autumn Burton shared, "I am glad that the program is here. It is helping me take the time I am here to look at myself and work on the things I want to change. I want to live a better and sober life for me and my family."

Haley Betterly said, "IGNITE is helping me get an education; it provides work, school, and self help support. The program is helping me better my life in general, while being incarcerated. The certificates make me feel more accomplished and I look forward to being able to apply what I am learning when I am released. I have earned my GED, and this will open more doors. I plan to continue my education and go to college. I also want to pursue becoming a peer recovery coach and help others who think they cannot do it."

Teresa Kortman added, "This program gives me an opportunity to change my life, to show myself and others I want more for myself. I want to live as the best version of myself."

Joshua MoneyPenny said that "The IGNITE program gives me hope." MoneyPenny has been incarcerated before and said, "I sat idle, there was nothing to do." Now he has hope for his

future. He is working in classes that will help him to get a better job upon release.

Iosco RESA and the Alpena County Sheriff's Department are grateful for the partnerships made with and support from multiple agencies during the implementation of IGNITE- with Genesee Co. Sheriff's Department, Northeast MI Community Corrections (NEMOG), Catholic Human Services, Michigan State University Extension, and NEMCSA. If your organization is interested in participating, please contact Nicole Hatch at (989) 402-5106 for more information.