

LocalNews

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NILES TEEN CENTER

Event promotes importance of after-school programs

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Contributor

Niles joined 7,500 other communities in a national Lights on Afterschool event to stress the importance of after-school programming Oct. 20 at Golf Mill Shopping Center.

A youth information fair, rally and open house were attended by teenagers, families and community members near the Niles Teen Center, which is inside the mall.

Speakers at the event included Teen Center Director Mark Williams, Mayor Robert Callero, Golf Mill Marketing Manager Monika Kalicki and Police Chief Dean Strzelecki.

"The after-school time can be the difference between success and failure," Callero said, as a group of teenagers sat in a circle and listened quietly to the speakers.

Strzelecki said that the hours between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. are a crucial time for working parents. Statistics show that after-school programs have a positive impact on children. For example the use of drugs decreases and the number of high school graduates increases with positive after-school programming.

"The programs decrease crime and increase safety, and foster community pride and ownership," Strzelecki said.

The event featured various information booths provided by businesses that appeal to teenagers, such as a video-gaming store, a recently opened trampoline center and a dance studio. The Niles Baseball League, Golf Maine Park District, Kiddie King-

dorn, the Niles Fitness Center and other organizations had booths at the event.

"The teens here are a huge part of Golf Mill Shopping Center," said Kalicki, who also commended Williams for his efforts in running the Teen Center.

Pam Surber, of the award-winning East Maine District 63 after-school program, TLC, spoke about the importance of after-school programming. She said the District 63 schools act as "hubs" or social services for the community.

"It's a very resource-rich place to be a young person," Surber said of the positive after-school options available to working parents in the community.

The Active Transportation Alliance displayed two large maps and asked the youngsters if they walk or bicycle to school. The alliance is working with District 63 to make it safer for students to walk and bike to school.

Cindy O'Brien, a high school teacher who has children and grandchildren who live in Niles and Park Ridge, attended the event.

"I think it's wonderful," O'Brien said of the Niles Teen Center. "It keeps the kids interested in community activities and community awareness."

Sobia Ghani, of Morton Grove, was at the event with her teen daughter and is thinking of joining the Teen Center in order to participate in some arts-and-crafts classes. Ghani feels if the children are involved in healthy activities they will avoid making unhealthy choices.