

Youth Work Snapshots
Niles Teen Center
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by [Matt Wagner](#)

Niles, Ill. (847) 375-8949

<http://www.NilesTeenCenter.org>

Objective: “To provide a welcoming, structured and safe environment for local teenagers to socialize, receive homework assistance and play games,” said Mark Williams, the director of the center. The teen center also coordinates community service activities, field trips and educational programs.

In a Nutshell: The Niles Teen Center (NTC) offers programs and activities for middle school and high school students, including homework assistance, game tournaments, computer access and movie nights. The center stages events for the community, such as an annual Haunted Garage, and partners with community groups to organize education programs and recreational events, Williams said. Social workers work with some youths at the center.

Youth Served: The center is open to all students from grades six to 12, with middle school students making up the majority of those who attend. Students who live or attend school in Niles pay a yearly membership fee of \$5, while those who live outside the area pay \$20 to join.

NTC serves youths from across the area, including an at-risk, low-income community near the center that is the site of significant gang activity. “Each student attends the Niles Teen Center for his own reasons,” Williams said. “Many have difficulty making friends at school, are ADHD or have significant social, emotional or family problems.”

Where It Happens: The teen center operates from a converted storefront in a Niles shopping center. The seven-room center includes a computer lab, homework area, lounge and game room.

The location, to which the center moved in August 2007, offers “countless benefits” because the shopping center is a community hub for area residents and frequently hosts local events, Williams said. The teen center coordinates with retailers and mall operators to coordinate publicity and events.

When It Began: NTC opened in March 2004 and originally served 20 teens from six local schools.

Who Started It and Who Runs It: NTC began as a partnership between the Village of Niles and the Niles Park District. In 2007, the village took sole responsibility for NTC and hired Williams to lead the center.



Artful use of time: Ceramics projects are among the activities at the Niles Teen Center.

Photo: Niles Teen Center

Williams, a former middle school social studies teacher, is the center's only full-time employee and is assisted part time by graduate students who help supervise the teens. Volunteers help organize and run special activities and events but do not assist in daily operations.

The Niles Youth Task Force, a coalition of community stakeholders that includes school administrators, elected officials and the town chamber of commerce, provides guidance and overall direction for the center.

Overcoming Obstacles: "Our greatest obstacles at this point are adequate space, limited staffing and working to serve up to 10 separate school districts," said Williams, who typically works 60 hours a week. "It is difficult and time-consuming to coordinate activities and continue open communication with so many different organizations."

NTC recently received approval for an expansion that will nearly double the facility's current size. Significant contributions from local businesses and community organizations enabled the expansion, which will be completed this month, Williams said.

Cost: The yearly operating budget is \$137,000.

Who Pays: The NTC is almost completely funded by the Village of Niles. A small percentage of revenue comes from membership fees and donations from private citizens and the business community.

Youth Turn-On: "The teen participants appreciate the friendly and fun staff, the wide variety of video and table games, the homey atmosphere, trips, sports at the local park, homework assistance, and the freedom to be on their own but still have a supervised environment," Williams said.

Youth Turn-Off: NTC is open four days a week, but teens would like to be able to come in on Mondays and Saturdays, Williams said. Teens also feel that the center lacks enough physical space, which Williams hopes will be addressed by its expansion.

Research Shows: "Informal research does show that the Niles Teen Center is a tremendous success," said Williams, who points to high attendance numbers and community support that has enabled the center to expand.

Contact: Mark Williams, Niles Youth Coordinator/Teen Center director, (847) 375-8949, <http://www.NilesTeenCenter.org>.