

Will the Lincoln Hills youth prison finally close, and at what cost?

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Isiah Holmes of the Wisconsin Examiner does a deep dive into the future of the Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake juvenile facilities in Irma.

IRMA, WI - The fate of the Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake juvenile facilities in Irma is still in limbo, with legislators introducing a bill that would authorize the creation of a new Type 1 juvenile correctional facility in Milwaukee County. Under the Senate Bill ([SB-520](#)) about \$42 million in the general fund would be allocated to develop the new facility, vital if the Lincoln Hills School for Boys and Copper Lake School for Girls are to ever close completely. For many legislators who discussed the bill during Tuesday's Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety hearing, closing the notorious facilities has been a long time goal.

"The date has long come and gone for the closure of Lincoln Hills/Copper Lake," said [Sen. Mary Felzkowski](#)

(R-Irma). During the last budget cycle, funding was provided to complete changes to the Mendota Juvenile Treatment Center, "so that we have the facility to move the girls into," Felzkowski said. "So we are in the process of getting that ready so Copper Lake, for the girls' portion of it, can close, a little later than I think we all hoped. But it is in the hopes now. The only thing we have left now is the Type 1 facility for the juvenile males." The bipartisan bill was authored by eight senators including Felzkowski; Sen. Van Wanggaard (R-Racine), Sen. Lena Taylor (D-Milwaukee), and co-authored by Rep. Evan Goyke (D-Milwaukee), Rep. Michael Schraa (R-Oshkosh), and 24 other state representatives.

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Rep. David Bowen (D-Milwaukee) has also pushed a bill to [end the practice of granting life sentences to juveniles](#) in the state.

In Wisconsin, some 603 juveniles are distributed throughout the Department of Corrections (DOC) Division of Juvenile Corrections' three main programs. Mendota, located in Madison, originally functioned as a 29-bed secure facility for boys whose "highly disruptive behavior and failure to respond to standard treatment has warranted their transfer to the facility from Wisconsin's juvenile corrections system," according to [a web page maintained by the Department of Health Services](#).

According to [the DOC's weekly population charts](#) as of [Feb. 4](#) the facility, with a capacity of 43, had 24 juveniles within its walls.



Lincoln Hills is on a completely different scale. Although it currently houses 38 male juveniles, the facility was designed with a capacity of 519. It remains one of America's largest youth prisons, with Wisconsin [leading the nation in referring students to law enforcement](#). According to a 2021 report by the Center for Public Integrity, nine Badger State students out of every 1,000 were referred to police in 2017-18, compared to the national rate of 4.5. As of Feb. 4, 11 girls were in the Copper Lake facility, which is adjacent to the Lincoln Hills facility for boys.

Although most of the juveniles held there are from the Milwaukee area, the facilities themselves are over four hours away from home. Establishing a new Type 1 facility in Milwaukee was part of a plan to move the kids closer to home, while also redesigning their setting to aid in rehabilitation. [In 2019](#), however, plans to open a facility in Milwaukee were met with stiff community pushback and the idea was scrapped. With the creation of a new facility now again on the table, the pressure hasn't disappeared.

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Felzkowski pointed to the pandemic as also a factor in setting the facilities back. “With that, the schools were shut down and a lot of the programming was shut down and it’s gone to virtual,” she said, “which caused the youth inmates that were there to become a little bit more agitated and to act out. In 2020, compared to the first six months of the year, [staff injury was up 4,700%](#).” Felzkowski added that “youth-staff battery went up 117%. Sexual misconduct went up 75%, and force incidents went up 58%.” Now, however, Felzkowski stated that, “programming is back on track, things have turned around. Things are going much better, but it’s past the time for this facility to close. This should not be a political debate; this is not partisan.”

Goyke stressed that “there was a time in the history of the state where Lincoln Hills was full,” adding, “Times have changed and the population of incarcerated juveniles has decreased in Wisconsin — has decreased in states around the country.” He pointed out the importance of Lincoln Hills’ 519 capacity in the equation. “Lincoln Hills is a program-revenue funded facility.” Essentially, counties and municipalities where the children are detained pay a per-kid, per-day rate. “So as the population goes down, the rate per kid goes up,” said Goyke. “The more expensive per-kid, per-day becomes, counties are incentivised to build alternatives locally. So the cost rises, so the population lowers. This is a financial death spiral that Lincoln Hills has been in for a number of years.”

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But while the need to close Lincoln Hills is agreed upon, exactly where the new Type 1 facility will be built is not. Particularly with the possibility that the Felmers O. Chaney Correctional Center in Milwaukee, which functions as an adult re-entry facility, will be repurposed for the Type 1 juvenile facility. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) objects to this plan and registered as “other” in the bill to fund the facility’s creation.

The ACLU stated that while closing Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake is important, “we are concerned about the siting criteria used for the Milwaukee Location. The establishment of a youth facility in Milwaukee County should not come at the expense of the Felmers Chaney Center.” [The ACLU’s statement](#) underscored the crucial pre-release services provided to adult men re-entering their communities after incarceration: “We call for further investments to be made in community services, wrap-around-care, and treatment, alternatives, and diversionary care so that all Milwaukeeans—youth and adults—can be rehabilitated in their own communities.”

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Still, the bill does not specify an address for the Type 1 facility, Goyke highlighted. Taylor, stressing the importance of workforce development, even proposed amending the bill to exclude the Felmers O. Chaney facility as an option. Although many state prisons are overpopulated, Felmers O. Chaney, designed for 100 men, has a population of 64

The DOC has a different perspective. Melissa Roberts, DOC assistant deputy secretary, said that Secretary Kevin Carr has been in communication with local community advocates to explore alternate sites. “Although we are moving forward with our plan based on what we know right now, we will continue to collaborate with advocates on this current location, and any prospective location they may offer that will fit our needs,” said Roberts. “The advocates understand that if there is no other appropriate site to consider, then we may need to move forward in the best interests of the kids.” No action can be taken, however, without action from the Legislature, Roberts said.

As legislative action lags and debate drags on, the conditions at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake remain questionable at best. [The most recent monitor's report](#), which draws from a visit by the monitor from Jan.13-14, noted some improvements. While conducting the day-and-a-half long evaluation, the monitor interviewed 39 youth and 27 staff members at the compound. “The youth-staff relationship in general seems positive and youth told the monitor on many occasions that they liked the staff,” the report read. The report also pointed out improvements to living units, class areas, and other forms of infrastructure. It noted over 100 cameras fixed around the facility, and continued support to the music and creative programs. The report stated that officials “should be commended for their continuing commitment to improve the physical plant which improves the daily lives for staff and youth.”

Nevertheless, the monitor’s report wasn’t spotless. “In general, youth and staff attitudes were not as positive as during the last site visit, but overall were generally good,” it reads. “The monitor continues to stress the need for more structured and meaningful activities as youth idleness remains a concern, particularly on weekends. Enhanced weekend activities will help reduce the risk of youth engaging in antisocial behaviors when they have little else to do like excessive horseplay, destroying property, and running around unauthorized areas.”

Some Lincoln Hills staff made an appearance during Tuesday’s committee hearing. They pointed to chronic burnout and low morale among staff, as well as ongoing safety concerns. Vacancy rates for several staff positions including teachers (at a 44% vacancy rate) and social workers (at a 57% vacancy rate), have increased since the last monitor’s visit.

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Wendy Volz Daniels, acting chair of the Felmers Chaney Advocacy Board, said that DOC's announcement last year that it would raze the Felmers Chaney facility was made "without any transparency or community input." She recalled that, "the site was selected because, quote, 'It's our land and we can do with it what we want.'"

Daniels noted that [the Felmers Cheny Advocacy Board](#) collected over 600 signatures of people opposed to the DOC's plan. Daniels warns, "If the bill is allowed to move forward without the identification of an alternative appropriate site, there will be extensive cascading negative effects like dominoes falling because of your decision. Eliminating those 100 beds at the pre-release center in Milwaukee is a tragic mistake." Daniels stressed that, "Milwaukee needs more pre-release center beds, not fewer."

Sharlen Moore, executive director of Urban Underground, reminded the committee that "some of the children that we're talking about, they're real-life human beings. They are young people that sometimes didn't have a mom there to say, 'How you doing? What can we talk about today? How can I help you? How can I support you?'" Moore stressed that, "these young people need more." Moore pressed to the committee, "this is an opportunity and a moment for us to do it right."

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