



Friday, March 18, 2022

Governor Tony Evers,

The undersigned organizations are writing this letter today to ask that when you sign Senate Bill 520 into law, finally closing Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake Schools, you carefully consider the facility's site in Milwaukee County. It is long overdue that the facilities close and youth be closer to home, where they have greater access to their families and the resources they need.

While we support the closure of these youth prisons, we also adamantly oppose the proposed demolition of the Felmers O. Chaney Correctional Center to make room for the construction of a new Type 1 juvenile facility. Instead, we urge you to seek alternative sites in Milwaukee, which bring youth closer to home while preserving the Chaney Center and the pivotal reentry services it provides.

We respectfully request that you convene a group to revisit the Type 1 facility site selection in Milwaukee County and take seriously the proposals offered by the Felmers O. Chaney Advisory Board, which has already started this work and identified multiple sites, aside from the Chaney Center, that might be appropriate for the new facility.

As you know, there's a sizable number of members of the Milwaukee community, many of whom are directly impacted, who oppose the closure of the Chaney Center as part of the plan to close Lincoln Hills. The Chaney Center provides many essential services and resources to incarcerated men who are reentering their community. Providing those services is vitally important for their successful reintegration into the community. It helps to make our state stronger and safer by providing services that improve the quality of life and hope for the future.

We can all agree that Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake - in rural Wisconsin, hundreds of miles from many of these youths' homes - are not the right place for our youth. The inadequate and lack of culturally competent programming have been noted for years, in virtually every report issued by the monitor of the court settlement of the conditions lawsuit against the facilities. Even now, 19% of youth who answered a survey said that staff shows them respect, with only 52% of youth responding that staff were good role models for them.

Moreover, the monitor's latest [report](#), issued last month, showed a continuing teacher shortage, with 11 vacancies representing 44% of the positions. Social worker vacancies also remain very high, at 57%. It is clear that Lincoln Hills lacks the staff and capacity to provide these children with the standard of care they deserve. On top of that, the steep cost of housing children at Lincoln Hills – \$1,150 a day per child – makes being incarcerated there an alienating, expensive, and damaging experience for youth who deserve holistic support that allows them to learn and grow into successful adults.

These youth would benefit from the programs and services that are more readily available closer to home. In fact, 55% of the youth who responded to a survey said that it would be easier for their families to visit if the facilities were closer.

As someone who has dedicated your entire career to protecting youth and ensuring that they have adequate access to all the tools necessary to be successful adults, this provides an opportunity for you to show you stand with the youth of Wisconsin and their families. At the same time, we urge you to preserve a necessary resource for the Milwaukee men returning from incarceration. We share your commitment to a bright future for these children, full of care and opportunity.

We thank you for your consideration and look forward to your response.

Signed,
ACLU of Wisconsin
Juvenile Law Center
Felmers Chaney Advocacy Board (FCAB)
Youth Justice Milwaukee
Milwaukee Innersity Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAH)
Breaking the Chains Church Steering Committee
The Community
EX-incarcerated PEOPLE Organizing (EXPO)
Bishop Paul Erickson
Project RETURN, Inc.
Greater Milwaukee Synod Council, Ev. Lutheran Church in America