



WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

Governor Tony Evers / Secretary Kevin A. Carr

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Latest Report Shows Lincoln Hills/Copper Lake Moving in Right Direction, Grappling with Change

(Madison, Wis.) – The Wisconsin Department of Corrections (DOC) continues to make steps towards positive change at Lincoln Hills School/Copper Lake School (LHS/CLS).

The court-appointed Monitor tasked with tracking progress at the schools filed her latest report today. It noted DOC has gained “substantial compliance” with an additional two elements of the consent decree stemming from a 2017 lawsuit against the previous administration over conditions at the schools. This also marks the 7th straight report from the Monitor in which the DOC has been in partial or substantial compliance with all elements listed in the consent decree.

However, in [this latest report](#), the Monitor notes that staff wellness, if it does not improve, will continue to challenge progress at LHS/CLS.

The report notes the overall atmosphere at the facilities during the Monitor’s site visit was good and that a large majority of staff were in good spirits during her visit. Some staff, though, expressed anxiety, which the Monitor believes impacts their wellness and negatively impacts the overall environment.

“Staff wellness is something that has to be a continued focus for us at Lincoln Hill and Copper Lake,” said DOC Secretary Kevin Carr, adding that the agency is in the process of hiring a position that will be working on approaches related to wellness. “We’ve asked our staff to make major changes in the way we run our juvenile facilities, and change can be difficult. But we are committed to those changes and to helping staff navigate them.”

The report states some staff feel frustrated and shared concern about having fewer “punitive tools” to manage youth behavior. This has been a common theme in the Monitor’s reports since the DOC eliminated the use of pepper spray and administrative confinement, and the report emphasizes that staff perception of a lack of ways to hold youth accountable “seems to be due to restrictions on engaging in past practices such as confinement.”

Dozens of youth were interviewed for the report and expressed a variety of concerns, including lack of structured activity and excessive use of force from staff. The Monitor also states concern about “inadequate

accountability for staff who have engaged in improper behavior (such as excessive force or verbal abuse) towards youth.” However, the report also notes use of physical and mechanical restraint were down compared to six months prior and appeared to be trending in the right direction, and the DOC believes it is holding staff appropriately accountable through the discipline schedule for state workers.

“We have no tolerance for abuse of those in our care, youth or adult, and take accusations of abuse seriously,” said Sec. Carr.

The report credits the DOC for creating an outdoor visitation space for the resumption of in-person visits from families earlier this month, making safety improvements in youth cottages, and using the Care Team concept as a way to reduce the need for restraints in dealing with youth.

Moving forward, the Monitor recommends the DOC continue its work to increase staff morale, but also recommends staff take ownership of creating a safe environment by building a better rapport with the youth, creating meaningful activities for youth, providing consistent and air treatment, and utilizing the skills they are learning through Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), which the DOC is transitioning to as the primary behavior therapy in its juvenile facilities.

“Improving the behavior management system, improving the rewards and incentives, and developing engaging programming will have a positive impact on the overall behavior and atmosphere issues that are driving the main issues that are frustrating both staff and youth. Implementation of the new behavior management system is one of the most critical next steps for the agency and facilities,” the Monitor wrote in the report, adding that fully integrating DBT into programming at LHS/CLS will lead to a significant reduction in actual and perceived safety concerns.

The Monitoring team observed “several very good interactions with youth by staff”, but also pointed out that, despite adequate staffing levels during the visit, staff in some living units did not engage with or position themselves near the youth, which she believes would create more positive staff-youth relationships and promote a safer environment for all.

The report notes a significant increase in the average amount of time youth spend on education, but adds that youth still have too much idle time, particularly on weekends. To illustrate those concerns, the Monitor noted 42% of incidents involving youth at LHS/CLS happen on either Saturday or Sunday, and suggested a plan to expand the successful music, art, welding and gardening to the weekends. The report also stressed the importance of closing LHS/CLS and moving youth closer to locations where gender and culturally competent programming and services are available.

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