

Dept. of Corrections: 6th Monitor report highlights improvements at Lincoln Hills/Copper Lake

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MADISON — Staff at the Wisconsin Department of Corrections (DOC) and Lincoln Hills School/Copper Lake School have made the best of a challenging situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the [latest report](#) filed this week by the court-appointed monitor for the schools.

“Agency and facility leadership are to be commended for their commitment to maintaining operational activities as best possible during the Covid-19 response and remaining focused on reducing room confinement as best possible,” the Monitor noted in the conclusion of her latest report.

The Monitor’s latest visit to observe the schools took place May 15. Due to the pandemic, onsite time was limited to one day and the review included both in-person and virtual interviews. The report noted that under the circumstances (due to COVID-19), the easy approach would have been to keep youth in their rooms as much as possible to reduce the risk of infection, but that DOC and school leadership tried to maintain facility operations as much as possible. The Monitor said this decision reflects on the agency’s “...commitment to improving conditions of confinement.”

“This report validates the decisions we made at Lincoln Hills School/Copper Lake School during this health crisis to keep youth safe while maintaining programming,” said DOC Secretary Kevin Carr. “We thank the Monitor for the feedback included in this report and look forward to our continued work with her in the future.”

The Monitor interviewed 62 youth and 42 staff members for the report, which also

found:

- Positive attitudes among youth and staff to the many changes implemented during this crisis
- Change to virtual education that was consistent with other schools throughout the country
- Drastic decrease in staff who feel the facility is unsafe
- No complaints from interviewed youth about confinement, restraints, being unfairly treated by staff or feeling unsafe.

“We see this as a very positive report because it shows continued improvement” said DOC Division of Juvenile Corrections Administrator Ron Hermes. “It also points to opportunities for growth that we will continue to embrace moving forward.”

Youth interviewed said they miss in-person visits that were suspended due to the pandemic, but that they have enjoyed Zoom visits with their families. Youth at the schools have had a combined 831 video visits since March 26th, and 41% of those who completed a survey regarding their video visits indicated they had not previously received an in-person visit.

“Zoom calls are definitely a positive that has come out of this terrible pandemic. Youth in our care are engaging with their families at a level that has surpassed what we thought was possible,” Administrator Hermes said, adding that DOC will continue video visits at the schools even after in-person visitation resumes.

Regular reports on Lincoln Hills School/Copper Lake School from the court-appointed monitor are connected to a 2017 lawsuit brought by the American Civil Liberties Union.