

Dept. of Corrections: Monitor notes significant improvements in atmosphere and morale at Lincoln Hills/Copper Lake

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Madison, Wis. – The court-appointed Monitor’s 11th report for Lincoln Hills School/Copper Lake School was filed with the court today, and noted multiple improvements at the juvenile facility and in DOC’s efforts to meet the requirements of a court order.

The report highlights Wisconsin DOC’s continued steps to achieve compliance with elements of a consent decree, stemming from a 2017 lawsuit and investigation into substandard conditions at the facility under the previous administration. In the first report from the Monitor, filed shortly after the Evers Administration took office, DOC was in substantial compliance with just one of roughly 50 benchmarks measured by the Monitor. Less than three years later, this latest report shows DOC is now in substantial compliance with 12 items, with the Monitor noting the agency is close to substantial compliance with a handful of others. In addition, DOC continues to be in at least partial compliance with all requirements.

“I always say progress is not linear, but the trend line points to continued improvements that will make the facility safer for both youth and staff,” said DOC Secretary Kevin Carr. “The steps this administration has taken at Lincoln Hills School/Copper Lake School have not always been easy. However, I believe they were necessary to transform the schools into a facility where youth are provided evidence-based treatment and education, not just punishment.”

One major highlight of this latest report is the relationship between youth and staff seemed improved during the site visit in October, compared to the Monitor's previous visit. The Monitor cited positive body language and tone from both youth and staff.

"None of the youth made a single complaint to the Monitoring team even when asked probing questions," the Monitor wrote in the report. "Previously, youth complained about food, education, not being let out of their rooms to use the bathroom when needed, being confined, staff not engaging with them, staff going hands on too soon, staff not caring about them and general treatment. Youth did not make any of these complaints this site visit. In fact, several youths spoke to the Monitoring team and indicated that the facility culture, programs, and safety is much better now compared to their previous commitments to the facility. This is a good sign that the facility is moving in a positive direction."

The Monitor also specifically pointed out facility improvements this administration has made, saying, "The physical plant is significantly safer than three years ago."

Some of the latest facility-improvement projects include:

- Continuing installation in all living units of windows made of safety glass, which is very difficult to break and will improve safety while reduce the need to replace windows at the schools.
- Replacement of failing boilers in some living units
- New LED lighting in youth rooms and dayrooms that should make a critical difference in the coming winter months

The Report indicates the Monitor's opinion that the youth have responded positively to less idle/unstructured time. However, she states a need for even more structured and meaningful activities for youth, particularly during nights and weekends. To this end, Wisconsin DOC recently expanded weekend programming, but those steps will not be taken into consideration until the next report from the Monitor.

Another concern noted in the report was an increase in use of mechanical restraints on youth in the summer months, numbers which have since come down. Also, the report notes an agreement between DOC and youth advocates on how to ensure observation status is not being used as a form of punitive confinement. Observation

status is designed to be short-term confinement that allows for confined observation of youth who have been exhibiting behavior that could be dangerous to themselves or others. To address concerns about observation status being punitive, DOC will only be placing youth in observation status if they are a danger to themselves moving forward.