

Evers' budget would revamp plans to close state's youth prisons as part of juvenile justice system overhaul

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Gov. Tony Evers is proposing an overhaul of how Wisconsin treats juvenile offenders, including moving almost all minors out of the adult criminal justice system and revamping the state's approach to youth prisons.

Evers said in his budget address last night the package includes closing the state's youth prisons Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake, but only when it can be done "safely and responsibly."

Lawmakers and former Gov. Scott Walker in 2018 first set a deadline to close the troubled youth prisons. But the plan they hatched to replace it, including a state prison for Wisconsin's most serious youth offenders and county-run facilities for others, has run into a series of issues, including a lack of appropriate funding.

"Our justice system should be about both accountability but also about the opportunity for treatment and rehabilitation," Evers said last night. "And any meaningful reform of the juvenile justice system must include this approach."

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But Joint Finance Co-chair Mark Born, R-Beaver Dam, argued such wide-ranging changes belong in standalone legislation, not the state budget. He said those discussions should include the Legislature's corrections committees as well as those dealing with children and families.

He argued the state shouldn't move away from having a facility to house the most serious youth offenders.

“There were reasons we didn’t go that direction in the past, and I’m not sure any of that has changed,” Born said.

Nearly three years ago, lawmakers and Walker moved to close the troubled youth prisons in northern Wisconsin following reports guards had mistreated the teens being held there. They approved setting a summer 2021 deadline to close both facilities.

But the plan quickly ran into issues about funding for two state-run “type 1” facilities to house the most serious offenders. Several counties that had expressed an interest in running one of the facilities for less serious offenders paused those efforts last year with only Racine County moving forward.

Evers’ budget proposal follows two tracks. One, he is proposing smaller, regional-based facilities.

Two, he is calling for an end to 17-year-olds being placed in the adult criminal justice system with some exceptions. According to the gov’s office, Wisconsin is one of three states that automatically treats 17-year-olds as adults for criminal prosecution.

The proposal also includes:

- *\$8.9 million for a pilot program that would help counties provide evidence-based treatment to help moderate- and high-risk youth in their communities rather than placing them outside their homes;
- *\$1.6 million for out-of-home care providers to provide intensive services;
- *\$1 million to train staff who deal with youthful offenders;

The proposal also includes steps such as changing the conditions in which someone under 18 may be waived into adult court and increasing the age of delinquency to 12 from 10.

The proposals are part of Evers’ larger budget. The two-year spending plan calls for a \$3.2 billion spending increase in general purpose revenue, the restoration of collective bargaining powers for many public employees, and a host of tax changes that would benefit low- and moderate-income Wisconsinites while the wealthy and large manufacturers would pay more.

See more on the overall budget proposal, including WisPolitics.com coverage, the

Evers speech video and text, the Budget in Brief and other documents from DOA:
<https://www.wispolitics.com/2021/half-of-evers-proposed-3-2b-budget-increase-slated-for-k-12-education/>