

# Bipartisan bill would construct juvenile detention facility in Milwaukee

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Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle generally agreed moving forward with a plan to replace Wisconsin's troubled youth prison with a new facility in Milwaukee is good, but some from the area balked at plans to get there by revamping an existing DOC work-release facility.

During a Senate Judiciary and Public Safety Committee public hearing yesterday, Dems voiced general support for a Republican-authored bill to fund a new \$42 million juvenile prison in Milwaukee County. Lawmakers in recent months have said the effort is the last move needed to finally close Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake in northern Wisconsin and bring many of the young inmates closer to home in Milwaukee.

Sen. Lena Taylor, D-Milwaukee, supports the move to close the youth prisons and build a new facility in her area. But in the hearing she adamantly opposed Department of Corrections plans to repurpose Felmers O. Chaney Correctional Center into a youth facility.

"Well I'm not looking for perfect, and I've never been a legislator to let the perfect get in the way of the better, but sometimes it's not even good what we do," she said. "So I can't say enough, as I said to the administration in the beginning, that the Chaney facility would not be appropriate for a number of reasons."

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She said it would be "dumb" to close Felmers O. Chaney, which is meant to connect formerly incarcerated people with work opportunities, especially because it's one of

the few work-release facilities in the state. However, she was pleased to see the bill only specifies the new facility must be in Milwaukee County and not exactly where in the county.

Bill co-author Sen. Mary Felzkowski, R-Irma, said the long-awaited bill would improve the situation for everyone involved. She lives near the existing juvenile facilities.

“I have friends that work there that have been out injured as much as they’ve been working,” she said. “So it’s not just closing this for our youth; it’s closing this for the safety of all.”

Dem Rep. Evan Goyke, D-Milwaukee, testifying in support of the bill, said the move would also save tax dollars. By repurposing the juvenile facilities that have a combined population capacity of over 500 into a minimum-security adult facility, the 54 youths currently housed there could go to a smaller facility in Milwaukee.

As the youth population decreases at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake, counties that foot the bill for sending juveniles there spend more money per head to send them to the youth prisons.

“This is a financial death spiral that Lincoln Hills has been in for a number of years and simply put in part because it’s overbuilt,” he said. “We just don’t need the capacity and the overhead that a facility and campus that large has.”

The Building Commission is set to meet tomorrow to consider another key part of the proposal, which would spend about \$4 million on the planning and design phase of the replacement facility.

The state is past the extended July 2021 deadline to close the youth prisons set by lawmakers. Former Gov. Scott Walker in 2018 signed Act 185 directing the state to close Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake by July 1, 2020.

See more on the bill:

<https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2021/proposals/sb520>