

Dept. of Corrections: Monitor's report shows DOC's continued progress in meeting court order

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IRMA, Wis. - The latest report from the court-appointed Monitor for Lincoln Hills School/Copper Lake School (LHS/CLS) shows the facility has made continued improvements, and that staff attitudes are very positive in the face of various challenges.

[The 13th Report of the Monitor](#), filed today, notes the schools are now in substantial compliance with 15 of nearly 50 items in a consent decree stemming from a 2017 lawsuit filed against the schools under the previous, Walker Administration. That is two more items of substantial compliance than in the previous Monitor's Report, filed in February. The schools are now in substantial compliance with more items that were the primary focus on the lawsuit, like punitive room confinement, use of OC (pepper) spray and use of strip searches. In addition, LHS/CLS remains in either substantial or partial compliance with every item measured by the Monitor.

The Monitor's latest visit happened in early May but was a review of LHS/CLS activity for the first three months of the year.

"There was progress made in several initiatives such as a strong, committed leadership team, the quality assurance program improvements, training/implementing DBT (Dialectical Behavior Therapy), creating and implementing a weekly programming schedule, incorporating PSU (Psychological Services Unit) more into daily operations, the creation of the new recreation center, continued in-person education on and off the units, and engaging the educational experts to improve the quality and quantity of education," the Monitor concluded.

The Monitor states their belief that a recent increase in population at the schools, coupled with staff vacancies and various employee leaves, is making it more difficult to maintain effective staffing ratios for safe youth supervision. The report notes the schools are using supervisory staff, mental health and other staff to increase staff presence in the living units, and youth are being placed in operational room confinement more often than they have in the past under this administration.

“While these operational adjustments are necessary to promote safety for both staff and youth, leadership should begin considering other options,” the Monitor states.

“Our goal remains to have the youth in our care out of their rooms for school and other programming from 8am to 8pm daily, when safely possible to do so,” said Department of Corrections Division of Juvenile Corrections Administrator Ron Hermes. “Recently, we have not been able to meet that goal for every youth every day. The facilities’ leadership is continuously reviewing options to safely maximize the amount of time youth are out of their rooms.”

The Monitor’s latest report also noted a stark difference between staff and youth attitudes during this visit, and during her interviews with both groups. The report mentioned several times that staff were very positive, expressing a positive “body language and tone”; more positive than she expected considering the day-to-day challenges they face as a result of the increased population. In their interviews, most staff seemed to feel the overall atmosphere at LHS/CLS is improving.

On the other hand, as the number of youth at LHS/CLS has grown substantially this year, so has the amount of youth complaints to the Monitor. Contrary to the most recent reports of the Monitor, this one noted youth seemed frustrated and angry, and that attitudes of youth towards staff had worsened with an increase in overall disrespect. The subject of youth complaints ranged from food, to staff being derogatory in talking to them, to staff being too aggressive in use of force. However, the Monitor also noted she reviewed video of use-of-force and mechanical restraint usage from the reporting period, and the use of force/restraints were appropriate.

To address staffing, the Evers Administration and DOC have approved a series of recent add-ons to make pay for Youth Counselors and Youth Counselors-Advanced more competitive. As a result, most in these security positions are making \$10/hour more than they were at the beginning of the year. The administration has also adopted pay increases for other positions, like teachers and social workers.

“Everyone is looking for workers, so we had to offer a more-competitive salary. We thank Gov Evers and the legislature for working with us on that” said DOC Secretary Kevin Carr. “We also hope moving the schools to Milwaukee County, as called for in the legislation Gov. Evers signed earlier this year, will lead to a larger pool of applicants to fill critical roles.”

The legislation calls for placing a Type 1 youth correctional facility, run by the state, in Milwaukee County. There are still many hurdles to clear in making the plan a reality, including multiple levels of approval from state and local governments.