

# Dept. of Health Services: Groundbreaking launches construction phase of Mendota Juvenile Treatment Center expansion and renovation

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## Project to create space to serve girls

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) today broke ground to mark the start of construction for the \$65.9 million expansion and renovation of the [Mendota Juvenile Treatment Center](#) (MJTC). Located on the grounds of Mendota Mental Health Institute in Madison, MJTC provides mental health treatment to the most troubled offenders in Wisconsin's youth justice system. Currently, the facility only serves boys. When this three-year construction project is completed, the facility's one-of-a-kind rehabilitative programming will be available to girls for the first time.

"Whether as a result of past trauma or even just the difficulties faced these past two years, young people across our state are facing mental and behavioral health challenges—an issue, unfortunately, the pandemic has only further underscored and, in many ways, worsened," said Gov. Evers. "Expanding the services at MJTC will help provide more of Wisconsin's kids with the help, support, and treatment they need to get back on the right track."

"MJTC helps our most vulnerable young people turn their lives around with an approach that balances the strong hope, health, and healing orientation of a mental

health treatment center with necessary security,” said DHS Secretary-designee Karen Timberlake. “Thank you to Governor Evers, Wisconsin’s Legislature, the Joint Committee on Finance, and the State Building Commission for their support of this project. We are looking forward to the expanded opportunity to provide treatment for more boys, and the new opportunity to begin to provide treatment for girls. Youth treated at MJTC find themselves at the deepest end of the youth justice system and need the services and supports MJTC offers to successfully reintegrate into their communities.”

Established in 1995, MJTC serves young people who do not respond positively to the traditional sanctions-based approach of a youth correction institution. The premise of the MJTC approach is that treatment should do more than just provide youth with challenging behaviors and serious mental health issues with needed skills. It should also address the youth’s resistance and opposition to conventional behaviors and lifestyles. The MJTC approach uses intensive therapy to decompress the cycle in which punishment for bad behavior inspires more bad behavior, which is in turn punished. Patients receive care, encouragement, treatment, and education, which with the gradual development of trust, brings about more acceptable choices and personal esteem and autonomy. Over time, they act out less frequently and become more available for participation in further rehabilitative services. These services include individual and group activities and classes focused on assisting patients with accepting responsibility for their actions, teaching social and problem-solving skills, resolving mental health issues, and building healthy relationships.

“For our patients, a gradual compassionate process of care is needed to help deal with trauma and other serious psychological disturbances,” said Dr. Gregory Van Rybroek, the director of Mendota Mental Health Institute and a developer of the approach used at MJTC. “Research results from MJTC stand in contradiction to the common belief that nothing works to help these youth. In fact, the model of care at MJTC is effective with helping youth in the worst of circumstances.”

Several research studies show young people treated at MJTC committed significantly fewer crimes after being released when compared to similar youth who did not have access to MJTC.

2017 Wisconsin Act 185 envisioned a more expansive role for MJTC in the youth justice system, both in terms of serving girls and to account for additional referral points. Despite the Legislature not initially allocating the amount of bonding necessary to complete the required expansion, Gov. Evers was able to use his

partial veto authority in the 2019-21 biennial budget to increase the bonding available for this important project. Following a significant delay, in May 2021, the Joint Finance Committee approved the expansion plan and the Building Commission provided authority to construct and increased the project budget to a total of \$65.9 million in bonding.

The construction project involves about 102,000 square feet of new and renovated space. This includes 50 new single occupancy bedrooms and expanded areas for education, medical, and therapeutic services. The new campus will be able to house 93 patients, 73 boys and 20 girls. The current building has 43 bedrooms, with 29 used by MJTC and 14 in a separate wing used for other purposes. All these bedrooms would be part of the expanded MJTC. Patients will be placed on one of nine units based on their security needs and responsiveness to the treatment program.

MJTC will remain open during the construction project. A two-story addition to the existing facility with the new bedrooms and program spaces will be built first. Patients will move to the new space while the existing facility is renovated. New administration and visitation areas will be built last.

Constructed by Findorff and designed by BWBR, the expanded and renovated building is expected to be fully operational by early 2025.

Increasing the capacity of MJTC is one part of an overhaul to Wisconsin's youth justice system that includes the closure of Lincoln Hills School for Boys and Copper Lake School for Girls in Irma when replacement facilities are built.