

# Recommendations for Creating Alternatives to Sending Milwaukee Youth to the Lincoln Hills & Copper Lake Juvenile Prisons

## Background



There is a growing consensus among juvenile justice leaders, elected officials, and the broader public that Milwaukee should no longer incarcerate its young people at the troubled Lincoln Hills/ Copper Lake youth prison. Youth Justice Milwaukee (YJM) believes that the continued crisis at Lincoln Hills/ Copper Lake provides a critical opportunity for Milwaukee County to create a fairer, safer, and rehabilitative juvenile justice system.

Research has provided critical insight into the harmful effects of youth incarceration. Not only is reliance on youth incarceration counterproductive in promoting public safety, it poses irreparable psychological and social damage to adolescent growth and development. There is clear evidence that a system focused on rehabilitation and prevention yields far better results in diverting youth from the juvenile justice system; decreasing recidivism rates; and ensuring that those currently in the system have an opportunity to reunite with their families, re-enter their communities and develop into productive citizens.

YJM's 2016 publication, **Safer Communities, Stronger Families Creating a Community-Based Continuum of Services and Supports for Milwaukee's Adjudicated Youth** outlined specific steps Milwaukee County should take to close youth prisons and keep families whole and communities safe. Since the release of that publication, conditions have continued to deteriorate at Lincoln Hills.

**In light of the crisis at Lincoln Hills/Copper Lake, YJM makes the following crucial recommendations:**

## For Milwaukee County



- 1. Increase public safety by creating a continuum of community-based, non-residential services that will reduce risk and reduce racial and ethnic disparities within the juvenile justice system:** Invest in community based organizations and treatment programs focused on rehabilitating youth in their communities instead of incarcerating them. Additionally, the continuum would include funding for community interventions to reduce risk factors and strengthen protective factors. Such programs and services should be implemented with fidelity to ensure the highest rates of success.
- 2. End the placement of adjudicated youth at Lincoln Hills/Copper Lake:** Identify and contract with small residential programs in Milwaukee with experience working with high-risk youth. Milwaukee youth housed at Lincoln Hills should be brought back home and safely treated in programs designed to work with youth with high risks and needs. No new money should be invested by Milwaukee County into Lincoln Hills/Copper Lake.

- 3. Use the money saved from keeping youth closer to home and in the community to invest in community alternatives to incarceration:** Milwaukee County spends over \$100,000 to send a single young person to Lincoln Hills/Copper Lake. The youth prison model should be abandoned and replaced with less costly and more effective non-residential, community-based alternatives to incarceration.
- 4. Increase meaningful engagement with families of youth in the system:** Recognize that families have special knowledge that can enhance the design of interventions and treatments. Parents typically have more contact with their children than any system professional, and they can share cultural knowledge that is critical to contextualizing interventions to make them effective.

## Recommendations for Milwaukee County Judges

- 1. End the placement of adjudicated youth to Lincoln Hills/Copper Lake:** While in the custody of the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, dozens of youth have been abused, injured, and sexually assaulted without so much as an action by the state to stop the abuses at the facility. While other jurisdictions across the country are moving away from large, state-run youth prisons to community based, community-driven solutions, Milwaukee County and Wisconsin have not. In fact, the Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake prison campus is the largest youth prison in the country.
- 2. Work with YJM and Milwaukee County to create a true rehabilitative continuum of care where youth and families receive the services that make them healthier and communities safer:** To create an effective continuum of care, juvenile justice leaders should expand partnerships with community organizations working with youth and families in the Milwaukee neighborhoods most impacted by youth crime and incarceration. Community organizations should play a role in providing supports, mentoring and supervision at every stage of the juvenile justice system – and help provide effective alternatives to arrest, detention and incarceration.
- 3. With Youth Justice Milwaukee, commit to visiting both local and national organizations that provide services to justice involved youth who would normally end up in a youth prison:** By doing so, you ensure a greater understanding of what alternatives to incarceration would work for high risk, high need youth in our communities. There are several jurisdictions across the country that have eliminated the use of large, outdated prisons and invested in community solutions. Milwaukee should be one on them.

## Conclusion

Milwaukee County juvenile justice leaders must immediately stop putting our young people in harm's way by sending them to Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake. The longer we wait to invest in community-based solutions, the more victims we will have, the more children's lives we will destroy, and the more millions of tax dollars we will waste. Keeping Milwaukee safe means keeping kids close to their families and investing in proven intervention and community treatment programs that break the cycle of crime and victimization.

