

# Head of WA juvenile detention talks about the troubled system

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*Ross Hunter, secretary of the state Department of Children, Youth and Families, poses for a portrait in Seattle on Wednesday. (Nick Wagner / The Seattle Times)*

It's been a tough month for Washington's juvenile justice system and its leader, facing significant criticism for a sudden decision to transfer some young men to adult prison.

Ross Hunter, secretary of the Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Families, had wanted to focus this year on much-needed security improvements to detention centers and investing in trauma-informed rehabilitation programming.

Instead, he's now focused on damage control.

The embattled branch of Washington's executive Cabinet has faced reproach in [multiple courts](#) and been [admonished](#) by lawmakers and advocates calling for Gov. Jay Inslee to fire Hunter — who felt compelled to [publicly apologize](#).

At its core, this is about a rising number of juveniles being locked up and the overcrowding in state facilities. DCYF and Hunter argue that it is leading to more riots and assaults on staff. In reaction, Hunter, without warning many in state government, took extreme measures last month by transferring 43 men from the Green Hill School in Chehalis, one of the state's two juvenile detention centers, to an adult prison. And he said the state juvenile facilities wouldn't accept any more people.

The department has since had to backpedal both decisions after swift legal action.

Now Hunter wants to turn things around.

He wants to bring stability to the system, rebuild trust and even persuade state leaders to give him more support.

The population of Green Hill has grown due to the passage of a law that allows people to be detained in juvenile detention until they are 25 and [a rise in juvenile crime rates](#). Hunter said the situation came on suddenly, and his actions in July were necessary to handle a population far over normal capacity.

The department's long-term goal for juvenile detention is to open more small facilities across the state, closer to where people live, so they can be connected to the community and be in more therapeutic, rehabilitative environments.

DCYF is working on budget requests in the next few weeks with lawmakers, Hunter said, so in January when the Legislature reconvenes "we already have consensus around what the right set of actions is."

Opening new facilities takes time, though. And the Green Hill School, in particular, remains overcrowded. Hunter said it leaves him struggling to keep the young people and the staff safe at the same time they focus on rehabilitation.

"We're going to start with safety," Hunter said. "We'll add therapeutic education on top of that. We'll roll that back if we can't manage safety."

In a recent interview with The Seattle Times, Hunter hesitated to discuss his controversial decisions in detail, and he addressed calls for his ouster and what happens next.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**In the past month, folks have thrown around the word "crisis" to describe what is currently happening in the juvenile rehabilitation system. How do you respond to that?**

"Everyone's on hair trigger [at Green Hill]," Hunter said. "It's not therapeutic for the young people we serve, and that's our No. 1 mission. So we have a big spike in population. You can use whatever word you want to use to describe it, and it creates a situation that's not sustainable."

On Thursday, 229 young people were at Green Hill. The state says the facility can operate safely at or below 180.

Hunter said the pandemic disrupted a 30-year decline in prosecution of youth violence, and it isn't clear yet if that's a momentary spike.

“It’s not something that happened yesterday, but it’s also not something that happened six years ago. It’s a situation that we’re in and we have to respond to, and we have to stay focused on ensuring that our operations provide safety for all of the young people involved across the system,” he said.

**What data is currently used to predict population levels, and how does that prediction process work?**

Currently, the juvenile rehabilitation system is notified that a judge has handed down a sentence to youth and must be transferred to one of their facilities within three days.

“We need to make sure that we can accurately predict what seems to be a very different environment in county prosecutions,” Hunter said.

Caseload forecasts are based on long-term trends, Hunter said. But the trend has changed, so the department now wants to go “as far upstream as possible.” Knowing when youths are first charged with a crime instead of months or even years later when the case ends can heighten the team’s ability to predict long-term population levels. The effort to get access to that data and understand it county by county is what DCYF is working on now, Hunter said.

**At the time you made the decision to suspend intakes and then transfer the 43 men — which incited legal action quickly — were you concerned that those actions were unlawful?**

“Suspending intakes was a decision we made and absolutely we should have done more outreach and more preparation with the counties to do that,” Hunter said. “That’s on me. I would love to have done that. I responded to a safety threat when we had 240 young men on that campus, and I needed to not have another five or 10 come over the weekend, because I was concerned we’d have people sleeping on the floor.”

DCYF officials maintain they had the legal authority to transfer the 43 young men to an adult prison. All of them were over 21 and are serving sentences that will require a stay in adult prison eventually. Thurston County Superior Court Judge Anne Egeler ruled the transfer violated state statute and a settlement agreement reached last year and ordered the men transferred back to Green Hill. DCYF complied with the court order but is appealing the court’s decision.

Six of the 43 men who were transferred to the adult prison chose voluntarily to remain there.

**Are you planning to go through residential review hearings in line with the settlement agreement and potentially return those men to the custody of the DOC?**

To comply with Egeler's decision, initiating a transfer review has to be based solely on the young person's behavior — which was not the case when the 43 men were transferred. Under the court's order, DCYF can't do another mass move.

"We're putting some work into speeding [the hearing process] up," Hunter said. "We really do want to make sure we have due process."

**When was the last time you personally visited Green Hill? How were conditions there?**

Hunter said he last visited on Aug. 12 and has visited a "couple of times" in the past year.

"We need to have a calm facility," Hunter said. "When we did the transfer ... we had a lot more programming. We have less of that today. We are still trying to do as much of that programming as we can do. It is challenging, because moving is challenging. There's just too many people."

Programming can include therapy and education, opportunities for the young people to interact with each other. That gets more difficult to manage when there is a higher ratio of young people to staff members.

**Is staff turnover a challenge? What are you hoping the Legislature can approve regarding staffing?**

Hunter said staffing continues to be a challenge for DCYF. With legislative approval, he hopes to bring up compensation for the often mentally and physically straining jobs that require high expertise.

Between July 1, 2023, and June 30, 2024, staff members at Green Hill were directly assaulted 67 times, according to DCYF. In that same period, 113 staff injuries were documented due to such things as being bitten, choked, struck or restraining a resident.

Since December, Green Hill staff have been taken to a hospital or advised to go to an emergency department 24 times due to their injuries.

"We're trying to hire folks to do rehabilitative work with young people who have often experienced an enormous amount of trauma," Hunter said. "Working with them requires both training and commitment and empathy."

Training cycles can take weeks, so the department has contracted some staff into positions in which they are not in direct contact with young people. The department recently also added a team from the Department of Corrections with the agreement they're "operating under our rules," Hunter said.

**What vision do you have for increasing capacity with more, smaller facilities statewide?**

Hunter said DCYF's budget request last year asked for two additional 16-bed facilities in Clark and Snohomish counties. The demand has increased since then, but he said he doesn't have "detailed plans" yet for what the department will seek in the upcoming legislative session.

"It just depends on what kind of facilities we could acquire, where we could acquire them, where we can permit them," Hunter said. "I'd be happy to have a bunch of them in play, because I'd like to reduce the size of Green Hill. I'd love to get down below 150 [people]. Getting to 180 is a place where we can run it safely. It becomes more and more therapeutic as it gets smaller."

DCYF closed Naselle Youth Camp in 2022 after the Legislature instructed the agency to discontinue youth placements there. DCYF now isn't funded or authorized to send youth there to address overcrowding.

**A couple of critics, including some state lawmakers and the Partnership Council on Juvenile Justice, have asked for you to step down. I wanted to give you an opportunity to respond to that.**

"I come to work every day because I care about outcomes for children," Hunter said.

"I've done that for quite some time. I'm going to lean in on safety, and we're going to make decisions to have a safe environment. We'll work with whoever. The governor has made a commitment to safety for young people. We're going to continue to make those decisions as best we can."