

Some in juvenile detention could go to adult prison in Aberdeen next year

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This is a typical cell in the area at Stafford Creek Corrections Center in Aberdeen, seen on May 23, 2024. (Ellen M. Banner / The Seattle Times)

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Men in juvenile detention might get sent to an adult prison in Aberdeen as soon as next year due to overcrowding, despite a state law that allows youths sentenced before age 18 to serve their sentence with the Department of Children, Youth and Families until they turn 25.

Specifically, the department has been struggling with overcrowding at the Green Hill School in Chehalis. The medium-maximum security facility houses men and boys between 17 and 25 and can operate safely with up to 180 people. However, the facility has consistently housed over 200 since February and hit 245 at the end of May.

DCYF Secretary Ross Hunter previously said the overcrowding has led to “terrible” conditions.

The “preferred option” to relieve the stress is Stafford Creek Corrections Center, an adult prison in Aberdeen that houses about 1,900 men. The option includes two 24-bed units and a green space for men over 18, according to a news release.

“I want to emphasize that we are very early in the process of exploring this option. There is no immediate impact and no pending plans to transfer any young people,” DCYF spokesperson Nancy Gutierrez wrote.

Gutierrez said staff has been visiting multiple sites in recent months to address the growing population.

Green Hill has been beset by staff shortages, fights among residents, food insecurity and even 22-hour lockdowns in residents’ rooms, according to family members and legal advocates. Issues have led to a lack of access to the rehabilitative programming the youths are supposed to get before returning to their communities, according to DCYF and residents’ families. Staff members have been arrested and accused of facilitating fights between young people, sexual misconduct and distributing contraband.

DCYF said the overcrowding resulted in part from a 2018 change in state law that extended juvenile jurisdiction to the age of 25. In July, the department took drastic measures, refusing to admit young people at its detention centers and transferring 43 men to an adult prison. The actions drew immediate, fervent criticism, and DCYF officials backpedaled both moves after legal action.

To turn things around, department leaders aim to seek more funding from the state in the upcoming legislative session and acquire more facilities to reduce the size of Green Hill.

The earliest a new facility at Stafford Creek could open is January. The department is seeking clarity from a Thurston County judge who admonished attorneys in July for violating a settlement agreement by transferring the 43 men to an adult prison.

The department plans to continue considering other facilities, the news release said.

In a letter to Gov. Jay Inslee on Wednesday, civil rights and legal aid groups asked the governor to immediately address the overcrowding at Green Hill by reviewing individual people’s cases to determine if they have demonstrated rehabilitation and reducing their sentences. The letter cited state law that grants the governor the power to reevaluate sentencing ranges if a prison or jail’s population is over capacity and constitutes an emergency.

“The current investigations and long-term planning do not address the need for immediate relief,” stated the letter, signed by civil legal aid group TeamChild, the American Civil Liberties Union of Washington, and the Office of Public Defense. “Inhumane conditions at Green Hill are so dire that urgent action is warranted.”