

State in “early stages” of planning new youth detention facility in Aberdeen



Green Hill School in Chehalis. (FILE PHOTO)

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By Mitchell Roland / mitchell@chronline.com

The Washington state Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) is in the “early, early stages” of exploring a new youth rehabilitation facility in Aberdeen that could house up to 48 males between the ages of 18 to 25, the agency announced Wednesday.

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

According to Gutierrez, the facility would be located at the Stafford Creek Corrections Center in Aberdeen, which is managed by the Department of Corrections (DOC), though it would be entirely operated by DCYF staff.

The soonest residents could be transferred to the facility is January 2025. According to Gutierrez, the new DCYF-operated facility would utilize already-built structures.

In a letter to Green Hill residents and staff on Wednesday, Felice Upton, DCYF assistant secretary of juvenile rehabilitation, said, “The most urgent task for us is to find new space and add capacity.”

The search for additional space comes as DCYF looks to address overcrowding at Echo Glen in Snoqualmie and Green Hill School in Chehalis, which saw considerable population growth after state law allowed some minor offenders to serve their sentences at the facilities even after they become adults.

In July, DCYF paused intakes at both facilities and moved 43 residents out of Green Hill and into the DOC custody as it attempted to combat rising population numbers.

The move was ultimately halted after a Thurston County Superior Court judge found the agency failed to follow its procedure in removing inmates from the facility.

DCYF faced a separate lawsuit from 13 Washington counties — including Lewis — that alleged the agency failed its obligation and violated state law by suspending intakes.

As part of a settlement, DCYF agreed to pay the legal fees accrued by the counties.

According to Upton, DCYF “has heard from employees, residents, families and collaborators about the importance of education and programming, visitation and safety.”

“This facility could provide much-needed new capacity in a setting that supports all these criteria,” Upton wrote. “DCYF is discussing this option with many of the organizations and legislators who are interested in this issue, and we will seek clarity from the courts to confirm that DCYF has authority to operate this facility.”

After the plan to transfer inmates to the DOC failed, Gov. Jay Inslee directed DOC to send staff to Green Hill School, according to the Washington Standard.

“The Department of Corrections brings a unique skill set and is doing an excellent job,” Mike Faulk, a spokesperson for the governor’s office, told The Washington Standard. “They are present solely to provide support to DCYF for the safety of everyone at Green Hill. This has helped to resume a number of activities that weren’t possible before.”

On Thursday, Upton said the agency planned “to continue to tour and consider other facilities across the state.” In July, a DCYF spokesperson told The Chronicle the agency planned to open a new medium security facility with up to 16 beds in unincorporated “urban” Pierce County to house young offenders with “severe mental health, behavioral health needs.”

The facility, she said, would differ from the Naselle Youth Camp in Pacific County, which lawmakers opted to close in the 2022 session. When operational, the medium-security facility provided education and treatment for around 80 male offenders.

At the time, a spokesperson for Gov. Inslee said the facility's location made it "difficult and sometimes impossible to provide the full range of juvenile rehabilitation services that are necessary" for reentry after a sentence.

Overcrowding at Green Hill School has been cited among the reasons for a rise in crime at the facility, which have included drug possession, assault and other felony charges.

The Joint Narcotics Enforcement Team served a warrant at the facility in 2023. State Sen. John Braun, R-Centralia, called for a full investigation of the facility but was rebuffed by Inslee, who insisted many positive improvements were being pursued.