



# LENA C. TAYLOR

Wisconsin State Senator • 4th District

HERE TO SERVE YOU!

HAND DELIVERED

April 25, 2016

Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker  
115 East Capitol  
Madison, WI, 53707

Dear Gov. Walker,

I am writing today to ask that you call a special session of the Legislature to address the mounting crisis at the Lincoln Hills School and Copper Lake School juvenile correctional institutions. While I appreciate the steps that have been taken so far by your administration and Secretary Litscher, I fear they have not been sufficient to address the scale of this crisis.

Much ink has been spilled in these recent months in an attempt to lay blame for the abuse suffered by the kids at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake, but pointing fingers is a distraction from the task at hand. Our focus at this point needs to be on rebuilding our system of juvenile corrections into an institution that delivers the care and services our kids need in order to become responsible, productive citizens when they return to our community.

Sadly, Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake Schools have not been adequate to the task. We are not providing these kids with the services they need. They have been exposed to and participated in violence in their lives, and this trauma has had long-term effects on their mental health. Simply incarcerating them with limited programming only perpetuates this trauma and is demonstrably ineffective. According to the 2014 Annual Report from the Division of Juvenile Corrections, the three-year recidivism rate for young men in the system is 63.84%, compared to 30.1% for adults. This is not acceptable.

Moreover, the unaddressed problems at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake have begun to trickle down into our local correctional institutions. Because of Milwaukee County judges' understandable reluctance to send juvenile offenders to an institution they know cannot meet their needs, admissions to the Milwaukee County Juvenile Detention Center have spiked, from 461 in the last quarter of 2015 to 520 in the first quarter of 2016. This has resulted in a staffing shortage of 41% at the facility, and even a shortage of beds, with youths forced to sleep on foam rubber mattresses on the floor at least twenty nights since the beginning of the year.

Our current path is unsustainable, Governor. That is why I've requested a special session, because the kids in our juvenile corrections system need help now—they can't wait until January. I have introduced two bills, Senate Bills 803 and 804, that I hope you make a part



of a special session on juvenile corrections reform. The first, SB 803, would eliminate the use of punitive solitary confinement for juveniles. In light of what we now know about the effect of solitary confinement on an individual's mental health, placing young people in solitary cannot be justified except to protect the safety of the other kids in the facility. These kids are in our care to get better, not worse.

The second bill, SB 804, would transfer the Division of Juvenile Corrections from the Department of Corrections to the Department of Children & Families. Just like adults, when kids make mistakes, they need to pay their debt to society too. However, we must remember that at the end of the day, they are kids. Their brains haven't fully developed and they may have troubled childhoods that led them to become troubled youth. Maybe if we treated them a little more like troubled teens and a little less like hardened criminals, we would get better results.

In addition, I am formally requesting you make emergency funds available to address staffing shortages at the Milwaukee County Juvenile Detention Center in Wauwatosa, which has been forced to absorb a higher number of juvenile offenders because of the Lincoln Hills crisis.

Wisconsin has a duty to the young men and women in its juvenile corrections system to put them back on a path to becoming responsible, productive citizens, and every day that we allow to pass without addressing this crisis, we fail in this duty. I look forward to hearing from you on my request for a special session and for emergency funding for Milwaukee County Juvenile Detention Center.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lena C. Taylor". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "L" and "T".

Senator Lena C. Taylor  
4<sup>th</sup> Senate District