Securing the Future of Wisconsin's Model of Youth Justice

Background

In 2017, the Wisconsin Legislature passed Act 185 to close Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake and replace them with smaller, regional Secure Residential Care Centers for Children and Youth (SRCCCYs) focused on treatment, safety and rehabilitation. Racine County opened the state's first SRCCCY in May 2025, with Milwaukee County set to follow in early 2026. These new facilities reflect the legislature's intent to keep youth closer to home, reduce recidivism, support desistence, and improve outcomes.

Key Challenges

Successful implementation of Act 185 is at risk due to statutory restrictions, unfunded mandates, and operational shortfalls faced by Racine and Milwaukee Counties. The diversion of youth aids from prevention to facility operations threaten the sustainability of SRCCCYs and the success of Wisconsin's youth justice reform.

Youth Justice Investment for Better Outcomes

Reforming Wisconsin's youth justice system requires investing in prevention and rehabilitative treatment to maximize a youth's ability to live a fulfilling life outside the justice system and contribute to their communities. These investments also reduce the economic and social costs of incarceration.

Milwaukee and Racine counties stepped up to fulfill the legislature's vision for youth justice reform. Without action, we risk undercutting the outcomes Act 185 was designed to achieve.

Additional assistance to counties through increased Youth Aids revenue to support community-based programs is essential to improving outcomes, reducing recidivism, and costs to taxpayers.

Racine County's early implementation of the SRCCCY model resulted in unavoidable start-up costs and a $2.5 million deficit due to suppressed enrollment and first-mover challenges. One-time stabilization funding will close this gap and ensure the continued viability of the Jonathan Delagrave Youth Development & Care Center.

Meanwhile, Milwaukee County seeks $4 million in ongoing funding to expand staffing and fully implement evidence-based practices, including Dialectical Behavior Therapy and restorative justice, as well as vocational programs - such as culinary arts - to boost career readiness and help youth secure employment after release. Finally, funding SRCCCY staff training to align with trauma-informed care and adolescent development will ensure safer environments and more effective rehabilitation across the system.

Female Housing

Smaller female populations require centers to run at a lower census with higher staffing ratios and specialized programming, raising per-bed costs and creating structural deficits counties cannot cover without state support.

Joint Ask: Confirm the State's reimbursement process to ensure timely county payment for operating deficits in female SRCCCY units, guaranteeing equitable access to secure programming for girls in Southeastern Wisconsin.

Operational Funding

Current law forces counties to use Youth Aids to fund SRCCCY operations, while state-run facilities are fully funded.

Racine Ask: Create a $1.5M state operational fund and preserve $750K in Youth Aids to maintain core prevention services.

Milwaukee Ask: Ongoing operational funding of $4M for staffing and implementing evidence-based practices.

Staff Training

Staff currently receive adult corrections training that doesn't align with Act 185's treatment-based approach, causing inconsistent practices and added retraining costs.

Joint Ask: Direct DOC to develop and fund a standardized SRCCCY training model focused on youth-specific practices and outcomes.

Start-Up Stabilization

As the operator of the first SRCCCY, Racine faced higher start-up costs and lower early enrollment, leading to a $2.5M structural deficit.

Racine Ask: Allocate one-time FY25 funding for Racine County to stabilize operations and protect the state's initial investment in the SRCCCY model.