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Lincoln Hills juvenile prison to get new leader amid shuffling of wardens

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**Jason Benzel, superintendent
Lincoln Hills School for
Boys** (Photo: Wisconsin Department
of Corrections)

MADISON - The leader of the state's teen prison is moving into a new job as the governor and lawmakers struggle to come up with a plan to close the long-troubled facility.

Jason Benzel, who has [led Lincoln Hills School for Boys since January 2018](/story/news/2018/01/11/troubled-lincoln-hills-teen-prison-gets-fourth-leader-two-years/1025774001/), next month will take over as the warden of Dodge Correctional Institution, according to an announcement Wednesday by Corrections Secretary Kevin Carr.

The change is part of a reshuffling of leaders at six prisons. Carr praised Benzel in an interview and said his assignment at Lincoln Hills from the start was supposed to last for two years.

"His two years are up and we're honoring our commitment to him," Carr said.

Lincoln Hills has been the subject of multiple lawsuits that resulted in more than \$25 million in legal fees and payouts to inmates. A four-year criminal investigation of the facility [ended last spring without charges](/story/news/politics/2019/04/12/lincoln-hills-investigation-ends-no-federal-charges/3451458002/).

Benzel became the prison's fourth leader in just over two years during a period of tremendous turmoil.

Just before he took over in 2018, federal prosecutors notified two former guards they could be charged over allegations they broke a 16-year-old inmate's arm and left him naked in a cell for hours. No charges were filed, but the state last year agreed [to pay the inmate \\$875,000](/story/news/politics/2019/06/20/wisconsin-agrees-nearly-5-million-settlements-teen-inmates/1509075001/) to settle a civil rights lawsuit.

Benzel oversaw the implementation of [a sweeping court order](/story/news/politics/elections/2018/09/13/lincoln-hills-judge-oks-deal-eliminate-pepper-spray-teen-prison/1281151002/) issued in a separate case that forced the prison to stop using pepper spray and greatly limit the use of solitary confinement and handcuffs.

Conditions [have improved](/story/news/politics/2019/10/10/lincoln-hills-youth-prison-vastly-improved-since-court-order/3934216002/) in recent months, according to reports from an independent expert who is monitoring the prison as part of the court order.

One inmate "said he was here a few years ago and stated that the facility 'is way better now than it was back then,'" according to [the latest report](/story/news/politics/2020/03/05/lincoln-hills-fears-remain-youth-prison-but-some-conditions-better/4965733002/), which was filed last week.

But the latest report also noted problems persist, with 79% of employees in October saying they feared for their safety. Corrections officials attributed those attitudes to disturbances around the time and note employees have said they feel safer now.

"I am incredibly proud of the progress that we've made up at Lincoln Hills under Jason's leadership and I'm certain that he will be greatly missed because he was very well-loved by the staff up there and the youth," Carr said.

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Legislators from both parties have passed a law requiring Lincoln Hills to close by July 2021, but Republican leaders and Democratic Gov. Tony Evers have since acknowledged (</story/news/politics/2020/02/12/republican-lawmakers-short-milwaukee-county-juvenile-detention/4725418002/>) they won't meet that deadline. That's largely because they have not fully funded plans to build regional facilities that are meant to hold juvenile offenders.

The state will be recruiting a new leader to run Lincoln Hills, said Ron Hermes, the Department of Corrections' juvenile corrections administrator. In the meantime, Deputy Superintendent Lori McAllister will run the facility, he said.

New wardens at six prisons

Carr said he's moving wardens around in part because Dodge Correctional Institution Warden William Pollard is retiring. He said the new assignments will make the Department of Corrections more efficient and help wardens grow professionally and personally.

In addition to Benzel taking Pollard's job at Dodge:

- Redgranite Correctional Institution Warden Michael Meisner will become warden at Fox Lake Correctional Institution.
- Fox Lake Warden Randy Hepp will become warden at Waupun Correctional Institution.
- Waupun Warden Brian Foster (</story/news/politics/2020/03/11/guards-worried-wisconsin-prison-going-blow-up-leaders-sparred/5016198002/>) will become security chief for the entire prison system.
- Security Chief Larry Fuchs will become warden of Columbia Correctional Institution.
- Columbia Warden Susan Novak will become warden of Redgranite.

The changes take effect April 12, Carr said.

The wardens are not getting raises as part of the transfers, he said. Fuchs makes about \$98,600 a year and the others each make about \$107,200 a year.

In 2014, six wardens received pay bumps of 8% to 13% (<http://archive.jsonline.com/news/statepolitics/prison-wardens-get-hefty-pay-hikes-by-switching-posts-b99232534z1-252274021.html/>) when they were moved from one prison to another.

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