



STATE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
DIVISION FOR CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES

Lori A. Weaver
Commissioner

Marie Noonan
Director

129 PLEASANT STREET, CONCORD, NH 03301-3857
603-271-4451 1-800-852-3345 Ext. 4451
Fax: 603-271-4729 TDD Access: 1-800-735-2964 www.dhhs.nh.gov

May 8, 2026

Michael D. Todd, Esq.
Special Projects Director
Disability Rights Center – NH
64 N. Main Street, Suite 2, 3rd Floor
Concord, NH 03301-4913

VIA Email

Dear Attorney Todd,

As we continue our collaborative work with the Disability Rights Center (DRC) and provide requested records in an efficient and timely manner, this letter is being sent in response to your April 17, 2026 correspondence addressed to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

First and foremost, we are dedicated to providing trauma-informed care and supervision to all youth in our care. We fully recognize our dual responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of both the youth at the Sununu Youth Services Center (SYSC) and the staff who support them. DHHS has been deeply engaged in New Hampshire's juvenile justice reform efforts, including the expansion of restorative justice and rehabilitative programming.

SYSC is a locked, secure facility. Youth are detained or committed by the court pursuant to RSA 169-B when they have engaged in criminal activity and are determined by the court to be a danger to themselves or others, such that detention or commitment is necessary (RSA 169-B:14 and RSA 169-B:19). These youth often present complex and challenging behaviors. Our current programming model centers on restorative justice and rehabilitation within a clinically appropriate environment that addresses each youth's individual needs and supports progress toward returning safely to the community.

Our approach at SYSC also relies on structure and adherence to safety protocols. Predictable routines, clear expectations, and consistent schedules are best practice for youth in secure settings and support restorative and rehabilitative outcomes. As you are aware, part of this structure includes a scheduled bedtime, during which staff provide extensive verbal engagement and encouragement to help youth transition to their rooms.

Physical guidance occurs only after verbal redirection and verbal de-escalation efforts have not been successful. When necessary, trained staff explain to the youth in advance that they will be physically guided to their bedroom before initiating any contact. This practice is consistent with statute and with Therapeutic Crisis Intervention standards for graduated verbal de-escalation. RSA 126-U specifically distinguishes this temporary physical guidance from restraint, defining it as permissible when a child is upright and being moved to a safe location. These practices are necessary to support youth in meeting expectations related to both education and daily routines.

The assertion that SYSC staff intentionally agitate youth to cause physical or emotional trauma is unfathomable. No policy or practice at SYSC contemplates or condones purposeful agitation. Staff work hard to maintain safety for themselves and the youth, and they employ every possible verbal intervention before initiating any physical guidance. Physical contact used to guide or separate a youth from an unsafe situation is not intended to justify more severe restraint practices. On the contrary, it is a trauma-informed approach designed to avoid escalation whenever possible. The suggestion that staff are deliberately provoking youth disregards the extensive steps taken to de-escalate situations and the staff's genuine commitment to supporting youth development. Our staff choose this work because they care deeply about helping youth succeed, despite the challenging and sometimes dangerous nature of the environment.

These allegations have had real and negative impacts within SYSC. Some youth have begun disregarding structure and safety protocols, leading to increased disruption and a heightened potential need for intervention. This undermines their rehabilitation and their ability to be successful upon reentry into the community. A recent example was when, after several attempts of verbal intervention, a youth who was not adhering to safety protocols began yelling that the DRC said we are violating their rights if we put hands on the youth. The youth escalated, causing a safety code. The structure and safety protocols in place are vital to a youth's rehabilitation and ability to learn to be productive members of society upon release. Impressionable youth, who are in need of clear guidance and structure, can become confused and fearful when proper direction is not given and unfounded accusations, such as purposeful agitation, are waged against those in authority. Many of these youth have experienced significant trauma and these allegations have caused nothing but uncertainty and the potential for further trauma.


At the same time, staff are increasingly hesitant to enforce expectations due to concerns about repercussions stemming from recent interactions with the DRC and the Office of Child Advocate. Although education, training, and fine-tuning approaches are necessary and vital to the success of SYSC and the youth in its care, creating an accusatory environment where staff are afraid to come to work each day is unnecessary and negatively impacts the youth.

Our oversight responsibilities in response to these concerns have increased significantly, pulling staff away from core duties such as program enhancement and process improvement.

Despite these challenges, staff come to work each day dedicated to supporting youth who often present difficult and sometimes violent behaviors. They chose this profession understanding its challenges because they are committed to the rehabilitative process and to helping vulnerable youth develop into successful, law-abiding adults. We all share the goal of ensuring that the youth in our care leave SYSC with the skills and supports they need for community success.

We remain committed to maintaining a safe, structured, and trauma-informed environment at SYSC while supporting the rehabilitative needs of the youth in our care. We value ongoing collaboration and communication with the DRC and welcome continued dialogue grounded in accuracy, shared goals, and respect for the complex environment in which our staff work and youth reside. We look forward to working together to ensure that all youth receive the support, structure, and services necessary for their long-term success.

Sincerely,



Marie Noonan
Director, Division for Children,
Youth and Families

Cc: Honorable Kelly A. Ayotte, Governor of NH (governorayotte@governor.nh.gov)
Lori Weaver, DHHS Commissioner (lori.a.weaver@dhhs.nh.gov)
Jennifer Dougherty, Esq. (jennifer.dougherty@dhhs.nh.gov)
Susan Larrabee, Esq. (susan.n.larrabee@dhhs.nh.gov)
Samuel Garland, Esq. (samuel.rv.garland@doj.nh.gov)
Cassandra Sanchez, OCA Director (cassandra.l.sanchez@childadvocate.nh.gov)