



DURHAM COUNTY YOUTH HOME

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ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

January 26, 2026

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Disability Rights NC
801 Corporate Center Drive
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RE: Responses Invited to Questions from DRNC

Dear Attorney Carson,

In February 2024, Durham County proudly opened its new 36-bed Youth Home facility, designed to keep youth close to home and connected to essential support systems. The facility's development involved extensive research, including evaluating youth detention facilities nationwide to identify optimal design principles and programming approaches. Recognizing that effective youth services require community support, Durham County incorporated feedback from local stakeholders throughout the planning process, ensuring the facility would serve as a genuine bridge of support for youth and families during critical moments.

Durham County's dedication to creating an exceptional environment extended beyond programming to the physical structure itself. The facility was designed with dual priorities: maximizing energy efficiency while creating spaces that promote healing and dignity. These efforts culminated in a historic achievement—in April 2025, the U.S. Green Building Council awarded the Durham County Youth Home LEED® v4 Platinum certification, making it the only Platinum LEED-certified building in Durham County.¹ The facility features abundant natural daylight throughout the building, creating bright, welcoming spaces and high-efficiency building systems that minimize environmental impact. The overall design work together to transform what could be a sterile detention facility into a nurturing environment that supports rehabilitation and creates a safer space for both residents and staff.

This modern facility allows us to maintain strong ties with family support networks, mental health services, attorneys and legal advocates, juvenile court counselors, and community

¹ [North Carolina Youth Home Obtains LEEDv4 Platinum Certification](#)



providers. By fostering these connections, we ensure a continuum of care while youth are in detention, helping them stay engaged with the services and relationships that promote growth, accountability, and positive outcomes. Durham County Youth Home staff are dedicated to keeping youth safe and secure in a structured environment. They exude compassion and resilience in the face of challenges, while working tirelessly to ensure the safety and well-being of the youth entrusted to our care.

Disability Rights North Carolina (“DRNC”) visited the Durham County Youth Home (“DCYH”) on three separate occasions (September 4, 2024, February 25, 2025, and July 21, 2025) and made recommendations each time. Additionally, in an email dated January 13, 2026, DRNC invited the DCYH to provide information on planned actions in five areas, four of which allege deficiencies in the operation of the DCYH.

The information below is provided in good faith to address the specific concerns raised in the email and should not be deemed an admission of wrongdoing as we do not agree with several of the assertions made, nor is this an exhaustive response. For ease of reference, the issues in this response are addressed in the same order as they were presented in the January 13, 2026 email. No inference should be drawn regarding the relative importance of any issue based on the order of the responses. DCYH remains committed to serving the needs of its residents and is open to further discussions as appropriate.

1.) Time In Cell: Multiple youth at DCYH expressed being locked in their cells for about 23 hours a day. What plans does DCYH have in place to urgently eliminate conditions of solitary confinement (22+ hours a day in cells) and to maximize time out of cell for all youth in DCYH?

Assertions that residents are routinely confined to their rooms for 22+ hours per day do not accurately reflect how the DCYH actually operates. While the amount of out of room time may vary depending on safety and security needs on a given day, the facility’s objective is always to maximize residents’ safe access to programming, recreation, and interaction.

Residents’ time out of their rooms in the PODS is based on the number of groups that must be rotated due to safety and security concerns. Most residents rotate in and out of their rooms for varied periods of time between 8:30am until 10:00pm each day with more time out of their rooms on non-school days because a DCYH staff member must be present in the classroom at all times. Residents receive 30 minutes of recreation daily in the gym or outside (depending on the weather and adequate staffing) during the dayshift and 30-minutes of recreation in the gym during the evening shift. Residents often eat meals out of their rooms at the tables in the PODS. Residents have two (2) visitation days (in-person with physical contact) and two (2) phone calls with approved family each week. This is a total of four (4) opportunities of a seven (7) day week for residents to have family



contact. Residents have special activities such as weekly church services, volunteer group activities (in-person and virtual) for approximately one hour each event, school, individual sessions with mental health clinicians, attorneys, court counselors, and other professional visits. The DCYH's operating practice is to provide residents with as much out of room time, programming, and social interaction as can be safely and appropriately provided at any given time. The facility does not impose blanket or punitive confinement as a matter of policy. Realistically, DCYH must continually make real time housing and supervision decisions based on the specific safety, behavioral, and security needs of individual residents and the facility as a whole.

At times, residents must be placed into separate groups due to conflicts, threats, or other safety related concerns. Those groups are not fixed and may change as circumstances change. This may occur if a conflict develops between residents or if staff determines that separation is necessary to prevent harm either to residents or staff. Most of DCYH population are Durham residents, which means they may be co-defendants, victims of other DCYH residents or resident's family members, or have other community conflicts which result in youth having to be separated from each other while in the facility. Sometimes these separations are court-services requested or ordered. Having residents with such restrictions require staff to increase the number of overall groups, which in turn may temporarily affect each resident's out-of-room time. With more groups but the same number of staff, each group must be allotted less time out. Youth Home residents that come into the facility with no restrictions may sometimes develop issues or conflicts with other resident(s) which can lead to physical fights. When those situations occur, staff separate those residents into different groups. Staff, at times, must have very small groups, for the individual safety of each resident, which could reduce the amount of overall recreational time each group receives. These necessary, safety based, housing decisions can affect when and how residents are able to participate in shared activities, programming, or recreation outside of their rooms.

Safety and security risks include, but are not limited to, threat of harm to other residents in the facility, physical assaults on other residents that may include use of contraband/weapons, and physical assaults on staff (i.e. pencils, shanks created while in the facility, or other sharp objects concealed by a resident). Separations are to ensure all residents remain safe while in the facility. Staff reevaluates residents' rotation schedule daily with attention to each residents' services needed. While in their rooms, residents can talk to their peers through the doors, read books, and watch TV. When out of their rooms, residents have access to books, games, writing, counseling with staff, and group activities facilitated by staff or volunteers.

Last year DCYH contacted the State and tried to exchange some of the more aggressive offenders and/or those who had court orders to be socially separated. This would have allowed for more slightly larger groups and more time for residents to be out of their rooms. The proposal so far has not developed into a workable solution.



Juvenile detention facilities across North Carolina face ongoing staffing challenges related to recruitment, training, and retention and DCYH is no different. However, despite these challenges, Durham County has taken sustained and concrete steps to maintain adequate staffing levels, including continuous recruitment, classification of these positions as hard to fill, and the use of hiring incentives and bonuses. Since DRNC's last visit, DCYH has hired ten additional staff members.

Staffing levels are not merely operational issues, but are directly tied to resident safety. Adequate staffing is required to supervise residents, monitor health and mental health needs, prevent and deescalate conflicts, and promptly respond to any incidents involving harm between residents and/or residents and staff. When staffing is insufficient to safely supervise larger or mixed groups, the facility must temporarily adjust groups or programming to ensure safety and compliance with applicable standards. The hiring process for youth detention staff is necessarily rigorous and time consuming. It requires extensive criminal background screening, specialized training, and approval by the North Carolina Criminal Justice and Standards Commission. These requirements are designed to protect residents and staff, but they also mean that vacancies cannot be instantly filled.

Currently DCYH has a 45% vacancy rate for Youth Home Counselors positions. Twenty-one of thirty-eight Youth Counselors positions are filled and seventeen are vacant. The County maintains its commitment to residents and staff safety as the top priority. Additional operational reviews are planned for upcoming months to ensure the Youth Home remains a safe and supportive environment for all.

2). Disciplinary Practices: Multiple youth at DCYH reported on use of the Hole as a disciplinary measure. What plans does DCYH have in place to revise its policies and practices to eliminate the use of the Hole as a response to behavior?

It is important to emphasize that DCYH does not and will not place residents in any form of solitary confinement or "hole." DCYH does not have any rooms that are designated, labeled, or referred to as "*the hole*." We have Special Observation rooms that are designed for and used as mental health observation rooms. These Special Observation rooms are not used as a response to behavior problems. Special Observation rooms are only used when residents are experiencing a mental health crisis (i.e. suicidal ideations or attempts, etc.) and in collaboration with mental health clinical staff guidance. Special Observation rooms permit staff to closely watch juveniles who are at high risk of self-harm, so as to prevent harm or to immediately intervene before self-harm becomes deadly. Mental health professionals either direct DCYH staff to place youth in Special Observation or are consulted immediately after youth are placed in Special Observation due to an emergency. Examples of emergency situations that require immediate placement in Special Observation include situations in which staff find juveniles with items tied around their necks or with sharp objects used to cause self-harm. In those situations, staff immediately notify mental health professionals and seek appropriate guidance. In



other situations, DCYH staff wait on the direction of mental health professionals. DCYH policies are created and implemented with mental health professionals' guidance. Mental health professionals also provide guidance on what items residents can have with them in the observation rooms.

DCYH staff does not keep youth in Special Observation rooms unless directed to do so by mental health professionals. Mental health professionals assess the resident's mental health status daily to determine if they are safe to return to their assigned room(s). The clinician meets with the resident in person to conduct this assessment Monday through Friday. The clinician collaborates with the psychologist following the in-person mental health assessment to determine if the resident is safe to return to their assigned room and to be moved from Special Observation. If the resident is not cleared by the mental health team to return to their room following the mental health assessment, the psychologist informs the DCYH detention staff to contact him at different shift intervals (ex: 8a, 4p, and 10p) with updates on the resident. DCYH's disciplinary approach is centered on coaching and behavioral redirection to ensure safety and security for all residents and staff. This approach is used for residents who demonstrate unacceptable behaviors that may be disruptive to the program and/or threaten the safety and security of the resident, other residents or staff. While discipline may, at times, include temporary room restriction for safety reasons, this is not routine and does not include placing youth in a special observation room.

Durham County Youth Home initiated a Level System Rewards Program in the Spring of 2025 that emphasizes positive behavior. All residents are oriented on the system and clear instructions and guidelines are posted in each resident's room. If residents have questions, staff are always available to clarify. The Level Rewards System (Level I-Level IV) is designed to encourage positive, constructive behavior with rewards selected by the residents. Behaviors such as following instructions, accepting feedback, not bullying peers or staff, using self-control, attending school, completing morning tasks, keeping rooms clean, etc. lead to rewards. Some of the rewards include additional phone calls or visitation time (for Level III-IV), access to additional books, magazines, games, etc. and snacks. Level IV residents are rewarded once per month with a meal of their choice (from a selection of fast-food restaurants) that is fully funded and facilitated by DCYH staff. Weekly evaluations determine eligibility to advance levels. This system has largely been successful, and we continually refine it with feedback from youth and staff.

3. Education: In monitoring visits in 2025, multiple youth at DCYH reported receiving only up to one hour a day of schooling. State law guarantees a minimum of 1025 instructional hours per school year. What plans does DCYH have in place to improve access to educational programming, guarantee that youth receive at least 1025 hours of instruction per school year, and ensure that students with IEPs have their IEPs fully implemented?



Educational services are provided by, and are the responsibility of, Durham Public Schools. Residents participate in classroom sessions inside DCYH in their assigned groups. DCYH has three classrooms available for use; Durham Public Schools currently provides two teachers and two teaching assistants. Durham Public Schools serves DCYH on its traditional calendar school year. Durham Public Schools educators provide academic instruction Monday-Friday except for

holidays, teacher workdays or inclement weather days. Durham Public Schools determines if summer recovery credit courses will be offered to DCYH residents. Durham Public Schools has an educator who provides IEP/EC services to residents in the facility and is responsible for all educational testing, identifying residents who may have or need an IEP/EC services and all other educational services. Youth are encouraged to talk with the educators regarding their academic status and IEPs. DCYH has no authority to retain or review educational records of youth. DPS is responsible for scheduling and maintaining all IEP/EC services. DCYH is committed to an ongoing relationship with Durham Public Schools to ensure that adaptations are made where appropriate for each juvenile's educational needs to be met while also maintaining safety of residents and staff.

4. Recreation: Youth at DCYH reported far less than one hour daily of large muscle movement, which DJJ policy requires. What plans does DCYH have in place to ensure that youth receive at least one hour of large muscle movement, every day?

Residents receive DJJ required one hour daily of large muscle movement through 30 minutes of recreation in the gym during the dayshift and 30 minutes of recreation in the gym during the evening shift. Outdoor recreation is determined based upon weather and staffing. When outdoor weather is oppressive and recreation cannot be conducted outside, recreation is conducted in the gym to meet the one hour of large muscle movement requirement. There were several times during the Summer and Fall months when residents refused to go outside when offered due to the heat as there is no shade covering on the outdoor recreation area. Residents have the option to engage in recreational activities outdoors or in the gym. Residents can play basketball, throw footballs, play volleyball, walk around or engage in other recreational activities offered by staff. Alternatively, they can choose to stay in their rooms if they so desire. DCYH recently moved to a new facility and, during the building process, did not plan for the impact of no shade on the outdoor recreation area. This issue has now been identified and DCYH is working diligently to address it.

5. Finally, in addition to the four questions above, we wanted to ask about efforts supporting re-entry. We want to highlight the need for thinking about juvenile justice in terms of re-entry. What programs or plans do you have that you would like us to highlight or propose?



Pursuant to North Carolina General Statutes Chapter 7B, NCDPS Juvenile Court Services are responsible for assisting youth with reentry. Nevertheless, DCYH strives to meet residents' mental health needs while they are in our facility, and to connect to outside providers when they leave.

DCYH has contracted with several providers so that while the youth are in the facility, they have access to a licensed clinical social worker in the facility Monday-Friday 9a-5p who provides clinical and mental support to residents. There is a psychologist who comes to the facility once a week to visit residents referred by the mental health clinician or staff. The psychologist is also on call to the facility as mental health needs arise. Additionally, there is a psychiatrist who meets with residents two or three times per month as referred by the clinician and to ensure the continuity of care with medication management.

DCYH Youth Services Coordinator is also available daily to speak with residents and make mental health, medical or other referrals as requested. The DCYH Youth Services Coordinator, a full-time employee, is a liaison for mental health assessments and health care for juveniles detained at the Detention Center. The Youth Services Coordinator is responsible for case management of all disciplines involved in juveniles' continuum of health care-medical, nursing, substance abuse, psychological and psychiatric services. The Youth Services Coordinator is also responsible for direct care along with the Youth Home Counselors. The Youth Services Coordinator is trained as a Youth Home Counselor but also receives specialized training in Youth Mental Health and First Aid, Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST), and works closely with the mental health clinicians to ensure a trauma-informed approach in the care of residents.

Community based therapists or other clinical staff are welcome to visit residents in the facility as well. The mental health clinician who works with residents in the DCYH facility also assists the court counselors in transitioning services to ensure continuity of care, but again, it is important to note that this is outside the authority of the DCYH.

The Resources for Youth Success & Empowerment (RYSE) Assessment Center is an integral component of the Durham County Youth Home, serving youth both in detention and in the community. While detained, youth receive supportive services such as life skills training and discharge planning to promote successful reintegration into society and help prevent recidivism. Although discharge planning is the responsibility of juvenile court counselors, RYSE assists when appropriate with services that may include comprehensive screening, referral services, and collaboration with parents and court counselors to ensure strong connections to community resources. RYSE also provides the same resource connection services for community youth ages 10–17, available through walk-in or scheduled appointments.



The Durham County Youth Home is fully committed to operating in a manner that is safe, lawful, and supportive of the wellbeing of both residents and staff. Allegations regarding conditions of confinement, inappropriate discipline, and inadequate education accessibility are taken seriously and reviewed carefully because safety, dignity, and accountability are fundamental to the Youth Home's mission. At the same time, it is equally important that public discussions about the Durham County Youth Home be based on accurate information rather than assumptions or mischaracterizations. The County will continue to evaluate its practices, respond to concerns in good faith, and correct the record when necessary to ensure that the public, residents, and their families have a clear and truthful understanding of how the facility operates. We are dedicated to ensuring that every young person in our care receives the resources and guidance they need during this critical time in their lives.

Sincerely,

Sheila Bowens-Bratts

Sheila Bowens-Bratts, MPA
Assistant Director