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# State of New Hampshire

*Office of the Child Advocate*



March 30, 2026

## Concern for Practices at Sununu Youth Services Center (SYSC)

As you are aware, the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) was established in 2017 by the New Hampshire Legislature. The OCA was initially mandated to oversee the State's child welfare and juvenile justice services, situated in the Division for Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF). In 2020, the OCA statute was codified in RSA 21-V and expanded to include oversight of all child-serving executive branch agencies and any entity contracted or certified with a child-serving State agency. RSA 21-V allows OCA access to facilities where New Hampshire children may be placed. State run facilities such as SYSC and Hampstead Hospital, for the short term it was run by the State, have been a consistent focus of OCA monitoring. Prior to reduction in staffing in FY26, the OCA would prioritize visiting each of these facilities on a monthly basis; with the changes to staffing, OCA attempts to visit at minimum bi-monthly and more frequently as needed.

On March 9, 2026, the OCA received a call of concern from a child placed at SYSC asking for someone to meet to hear their concerns. The following day, March 10, 2026, Assistant Child Advocate Jason Taylor was present at the facility to meet with the child and document concerns reported. In the days following this visit, the OCA received additional calls of concern from professionals worried about the safety of the children. Due to information gathered during the meeting with the child, and additional calls of concern to the OCA, an unannounced visit to the facility was planned for March 13, 2026. Assistant Child Advocate, Jason Taylor, returned for this visit along with The Child Advocate, Cassandra Sanchez, and Assistant Child Advocate, Jen Jones. There were 15 children there at the time of our visit, which spanned most of the day, from 9:30am-3:30pm. During our time at the facility we spoke with staff, met with children on the units, and had individual one-on-one meetings with children interested in sharing their experiences confidentially. There was consistency in messaging, although we did not ask the same questions of everyone and we met individually with children and some staff. Below is a bulleted list of concerns reported to and observed by the OCA throughout that day, most of which aligned with the information shared by professional callers.

- “Lockdown” status was in place at the facility for approximately a month and a half.
- Initial “full lockdown” for 2 weeks; single movement (which means 1 child out of their sleeping quarters at a time), no off-unit time, all muscle movement on the units (which was very minimal), shackled to walk around off unit if needed/approved, and no education.
- Once “full lockdown” was over, there was a restricted status that remained.

- The restricted status allowed for only 1 hour of off unit education daily and 30 mins of gym time/recreation time daily. One meal a day was provided off unit, the remainder were eaten on unit w/ paper spoons typically reserved for children on CSU status (meaning they are an imminent danger to themselves or others). Minimal mixing of units allowed during school, gym/recreation time, and when eating a meal in the café. In the café, there is only socializing with peers at the same table.
- Children showed educational worksheets they were given on the unit and said they could be completed so quickly (less than an hour) indicating they were not getting sufficient education time.
- No outdoor time allowed at all; staff seeking creative solutions to get children access to outdoors for fresh air were denied. One staff member was allowed to open a door and let children take turns standing inside the threshold of the door to get fresh air on their faces.
- Could not watch TV during school hours so they sat and stared at the same 4 walls for hours on end; they had playing cards and one unit had a board game, this was the only entertainment allowed during schooltime hours - 8am-2pm on weekdays.
- Could not do anything independently, could not even get water or use the restroom without asking staff.
- Only positive note from the children was access to clinical services and continued support from the clinical team.
- New director makes promises and does not follow through. (e.g. Said he would bring school days back and did not; said a child would be moved to a unit where they felt safe rather than the one they did not feel safe on, but then refused to allow the move).
- If anyone is assaultive or creates a problem all children in the facility will have consequences. (e.g. early bedtime, not making levels, remaining on restrictive schedule).
- Lack of consistent rules and expectations of the children.
- Prior to the new director there was more programming and children were able to see/interact more with one another.
- Concern that there is now a correctional mindset driving the facility rather than the treatment focus that has been pushed for the last couple of years.
- Quotes from children:
  - “I left a program and came back to a jail.”
  - “We are in jail now.”
  - “This lockdown makes me want to tweek.”
  - “I am going to crash out soon if we stay in lockdown.”
  - “This isolation is making me depressed.”
  - “I don’t want to become one of those mental kids, but this is going to make me one.”

- “I don’t feel like I can trust staff.”
- “Being treated like a toddler is degrading.”

Upon hearing this information firsthand from children and staff members, and observing children on the unit as described above, the Child Advocate immediately reached out to DCYF Director, Marie Noonan, on March 13, 2026, via email to voice concern. The email requested a meeting with DCYF leadership early the following week to review the concerns and learn what they understood the status to be at this facility. It is important to note that the OCA did not receive any documented official report of a change in facility status throughout this time period and immediately following outreach to DCYF leadership, although we have direct access to the SYSC case management system. OCA and DCYF leadership met on March 17, 2026. During the meeting, DCYF leadership reported they would look into all the concerns noted and would like to schedule another follow-up meeting with the new Director of SYSC. Additionally, the OCA learned that the children returned to the full-time school schedule as of Monday March 16, 2026. The follow-up meeting with the new director (SYSC Bureau Chief), Joshua Nye, was scheduled for March 25, 2026.

On March 19, 2026, the OCA received an additional complaint about improper use of physical restraint which led to an injury to a child which occurred on March 17, 2026. This was reported to DCYF Director Noonan, DCYF Deputy Director Ross, and SYSC Bureau Chief Nye during the March 25, 2026 meeting. The OCA requested and reviewed video footage, reviewed all documentation relating to the incident, and compared what was observed and documented with RSA 126-U: LIMITING THE USE OF CHILD RESTRAINT PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS AND TREATMENT FACILITIES.<sup>1</sup> Initial documentation was completed incorrectly; therefore, the OCA had to point to missing critical information and request the forms be updated to reflect accurate information about the incident. Video footage confirmed the use of physical restraint without imminent risk of harm to the child or others present, and holding the child down in an illegal prone position for approximately 3 ½ minutes. Documentation also showed a delay in medical care provided for the broken bone. Subsequently, the OCA filed an abuse and neglect report with DCYF Central Intake due to concerns for excessive restraint leading to a broken bone, which will be investigated by DCYF Special Investigations Unit (SIU), a specific unit within DCYF that investigates allegations of abuse or neglect within foster homes and in-state facilities.

The Office of the Child Advocate continues to exercise heightened oversight at this facility due to the serious nature of the concerns. Assistant Child Advocate, Jason Taylor, returned to SYSC to check in with children on March 30, 2026.



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<sup>1</sup> [Chapter 126-U LIMITING THE USE OF CHILD RESTRAINT PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS AND TREATMENT FACILITIES](#)