



Cassandra Sanchez  
Child Advocate

# 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 two weeks; single movement (which means one 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 one 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 with 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 four 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 unit they did not feel safe on and 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 tweak.”
  - “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 learning 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](#)



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April 17, 2026

## Addendum

The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) began an independent investigation into concerns for the care of children court ordered to the Sununu Youth Services Center (SYSC) in March 2026, shortly after identifying changes in practices and treatment of the children. In addition to a thorough investigation, the OCA remains committed to maintaining a presence at the facility at least weekly and working closely with the Division for Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) to ensure conditions improve. Investigations by other entities have been discussed publicly, such as a subcommittee of legislators from the Oversight Commission on Children's Services and the Attorney General's (AGs) office. The OCA has and will continue to collaborate with these entities on their investigations while ensuring adherence to our statute RSA 21-V, including protecting the confidentiality of the children at the facility and preparing an independent and impartial report to the public with recommendations to the agency to mitigate these concerns in the future.<sup>2</sup>

Timeline of OCA action since March 30, 2026:

- On March 31, 2026, the Child Advocate and Assistant Child Advocate, Jason Taylor, met with legislators to discuss the attached document, *Concern for Practices at Sununu Youth Services Center (SYSC)*, dated March 30, 2026.
- On April 1, 2026, the OCA began receiving access to video footage of all units at SYSC during waking hours for the timeframes requested: February 8-14 and February 22-28.
- On April 8, 2026, the OCA met with the Disability Rights Center of New Hampshire to discuss concerns about the facility and to ensure we are not duplicating efforts as they also have legal authority to go into the facility and talk with children.
- On April 9, 2026, an internal meeting took place to discuss the OCA's process of reviewing RSA 126-U restraint and seclusion reports entered by SYSC, between January 29, 2026 to current, to ensure each one receives an individualized thorough review. The OCA is seeking to identify any incidents that include violations of RSA 126-U:4 Prohibition of Dangerous Restraint Techniques and 126-U:5 Limitation of the Use of Restraint to Emergencies Only, as well as any incidents that led to serious injury to a child. This review is ongoing.
- Also on April 9, 2026, the OCA met with DCYF leadership along with the SYSC Bureau Chief to discuss progress in the facility since initial concerns were identified. At this time, we

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<sup>2</sup> [Chapter 21-V OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE](#)

discussed heightened presence of DCYF leadership at the facility, the timeline to OCA receiving the remaining video footage requested, staffing levels, internal facility discussions on enhancing programming, consistent schedules for staff and children, concerns for restraint practices observed through footage review, and documentation.

- On April 10, 2026, Assistant Child Advocate, Jen Jones, returned to the facility to check in with a specific child and observe the current conditions.
- On April 14, 2026, the Child Advocate and both Assistant Child Advocates returned to SYSC for an unannounced onsite visit. During this visit OCA staff walked the facility and met with children and SYSC staff.
- On April 16, 2026, OCA met again with DCYF leadership and SYSC Bureau Chief to discuss the concerns herein and the recommendations for continued improvements.
- As of April 17, 2026, the OCA has reviewed 378 hours of footage thus far and this review is ongoing. From what has been reviewed, the children spent a substantial amount of time on the units.

During the visit to SYSC on April 14, 2026, the OCA learned that the children now have a daily schedule and more time off units. Beginning March 16, 2026, they returned to school in the classroom from 8:30am-12:00pm. Although this is a significant increase in educational time, it is still below the former school hours at SYSC of 8:30am-2:00pm. Children and staff also confirmed access to outside time, which was observed by OCA staff seeing a child playing basketball outside. It was reported that 30 minutes of outside time is included in the daily schedule for all children. The daily schedule was discussed with feedback ranging from much better than it had been to doesn't feel that much different other than a bit more time off unit. The most notable change that was shared with the OCA is the response to children refusing bedtime. It was shared that some children refuse to go to their rooms at bedtime, which is either 8:30pm or 9:00pm based on that child's "level" in the program. The OCA learned that staff have been instructed that at 9:30pm they are to open-hand guide children to their bedrooms if they continue to refuse. Through the OCA's review of restraint and seclusion reports involving New Hampshire children placed in residential facilities, we have learned that once staff go hands-on with a child it is likely to escalate the situation, and at times will lead to a restraint. Given this knowledge, the OCA will continue to investigate this new practice and its impact on the children at SYSC.

Although the OCA observed and heard of improving practices within the facility, we still hold concern for continued restrictions and correction-like practices. As OCA staff review video footage of restraints along with the 126-U reports, concerns for the specific restraint training provided to youth counselors at SYSC have risen. The facility uses Controlled F.O.R.C.E. MACH restraint training.<sup>3</sup> The website, along with an infomercial that can be found on YouTube, shows a program that is focused on military, law enforcement, and security/detention responses, and does not include language about a trauma-informed approach.<sup>4</sup> There are a variety of restraint training companies that do include the trauma-informed lens and provide a focus on de-escalation, which residential facilities within New Hampshire use regularly. In addition to restraint

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<sup>3</sup> [Unarmed & Armed Security Training Services San Antonio TX & Batavia IL - Controlled Force](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Controlled F.O.R.C.E. Infomercial - YouTube](#)

training, enhanced trauma-informed training for staff will improve their ability to respond to the needs of the children at the facility when they are struggling. There are numerous evidence-based training programs for facilities housing children that could help staff feel more equipped to manage a child in crisis. Although the full OCA report will seek to highlight areas of improvement and provide recommendations, there are immediate action steps the OCA is recommending to leadership of the SYSC and DCYF leadership that directly supervises them.

1. Discontinue the use and threat of going hands-on with children that don't pose a threat, even if only stating it will be a hands-on guide to bedrooms at nighttime.
2. Discontinue Controlled F.O.R.C.E. MACH restraint training for all staff and identify a trauma-informed restraint training typically used by treatment facilities. Consult with residential facilities within the State of New Hampshire to learn pros and cons of differing restraint training programs they have used over time.
3. Engage Youth Counselors in more intensive evidence-based training on trauma-informed care such as: Trust Based Relational Intervention (TBRI)<sup>5</sup> or Collaborative & Proactive Solutions (CPS)<sup>6</sup>.
4. Consult with residential programs across the State of New Hampshire to learn about more effective programming and schedules that meet therapeutic needs and support positive outcomes, while providing a safe environment for all.

These recommendations serve not only to protect the safety and well-being of children court ordered to SYSC but also offer support to the youth counselors working with these children day to day. Youth Counselors that feel confident and competent in their ability to work with and positively influence children through relationship building will find that they are better able to efficiently handle even the most intense situations. This not only keeps children safe, it serves to also retain experienced staff and reduce burnout.



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<sup>5</sup> [Trust Based Relational Interventions \(TBRI\) - Attachment and Trauma Network](#)

<sup>6</sup> [OUR SOLUTION - LIVES IN THE BALANCE](#)