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Sherman Park Community
Association (SPCA)

In Memory Of:

Felmers O. Chaney
(1918 – 2012)
Barry W Givens
(1949-2019)
Dr. R.L. McNeely, Esq.
(1946-2020)

FELMERS O. CHANEY

ADVOCACY BOARD

Phone: 414-795-2343

**Testimony to the Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public
Safety**

On Behalf of the Felmers O. Chaney Advocacy Board (FCAB)

In opposition to SB 520

February 8, 2022

The state legislature should fully implement [2017 Wisconsin Act 185](#) (Act 185) without delay including identifying a suitable location for the youth prison. However, members of the Felmers O. Chaney Advocacy Board (FCAB), are opposed to the current Department of Corrections (DOC) plan to raze the minimum-security pre-release Felmers O. Chaney Center and build the Type 1 juvenile facility on that site. Last year, the Department of Corrections announced their plan to build the Type 1 facility at the current location of the Felmers O. Chaney site without transparency or community input. The site was selected because it is “our land and we can do with it what we want.” Since learning of this plan, the Felmers O. Chaney Advocacy Board (FCAB), with the assistance of other individuals and organizations, have collected over 600 signatures from persons who also are opposed to this plan. I am delivering a copy of these signatures to you today with my testimony. The plan to demolish a building that is only 22 years old was done in isolation and with no transparency. If this bill is allowed to move forward without the identification of an alternative appropriate site located for the Type 1 juvenile facility there will be extensive, cascading negative effects, like dominoes falling because of your decision.

Eliminating 100 beds at a pre-release center in Milwaukee would be a tragic mistake. More than 2,600 persons returned to Milwaukee County annually from Wisconsin prisons between 2000 – 2018. In [2018, 29%](#) of all persons released from DOC were released to Milwaukee County. Milwaukee needs more pre-release center beds, not fewer, to give returning citizens an opportunity to get a job in the local economy, to put aside savings for much-needed housing when they are released, engage in treatment and educational opportunities, and to restore their relations with family and community. Currently there are only 269 pre-release beds in Milwaukee. (Only 160 of these are for men). Closing the Chaney Center would reduce that number to only 60 pre-release placement opportunities for men returning to Milwaukee. We already are not meeting the current need for transfer

*“Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are” –
Benjamin Franklin*

*“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's
the only thing that ever has.” –Margaret Mead*

to a pre-release center. These pre-release centers are intended to reduce the risk of recidivism. In turn, when we reduce recidivism, we are working to end mass incarceration. Reducing these beds in Milwaukee County will result in cascading negative effects, like dominoes falling because of your decision.

Tom LaBel, an associate professor, and chair of the Department of Criminal Justice & Criminology at UW-Milwaukee states that “based on the number of men and women returning to Milwaukee and Southeast Wisconsin there is a great need for more Correctional Center beds to facilitate the successful transition from prison to the community,” continuing that “if the Felmers O. Chaney Correctional Center is converted from an adult to a youth facility, a significant number of adult pre-release beds needs to be added in the City of Milwaukee.”

The Sherman Park Community Association (SPCA) was instrumental in having the Felmers O. Chaney Center located in their community. According to Dr. Thomas A. Lifvendahl, former Vice President of the SPCA, “The current position of the Sherman Park Community Association is to challenge the Department of Corrections to find a more creative way to house juvenile offenders.” He goes to say that “the Chaney Center’s restorative justice mission of reducing adult mass incarceration is a core outcome the Association fully supports! We continue this support. Our advice is to encourage full consideration of alternative youth prison locations.” Dr. Lifvendahl states “The SPCA requests the WI-DOC to allow sufficient time so that neighboring communities can join in facilitating a much-needed community meeting” before a decision is made to close the Chaney Center and build a juvenile prison at that site.

Since raising the concern about the limited number of pre-release beds in Milwaukee was raised, DOC now indicates that they will repurpose a couple of floors at the Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility (MSDF) as a minimum facility. I raise this issue today because there is no funding for this project, and there has been no transparency in this proposal either. If the Chaney Center is demolished, there is no guarantee that the re-entry beds will be replaced. For a whole host of reasons, MSDF is not a suitable location for a minimum re-entry facility. A potential continuing cascade of negative effects, like dominoes falling will occur if you vote in favor of SB 520 before an alternative site can be identified.

There has been no official action involving the exploration of an appropriate site for a Type 1 facility since [Walker Administration Study Committee](#) commenced its work in 2018. Three years have been wasted and Milwaukee youth continued to be held 215 miles and three hours away from their families. As many of you know, the Walker administration site selection committee put forward just one recommended location for the facility and it was rejected due to political pressure and by community members who were not invited to the table from the beginning. A second location was then offered by the former Milwaukee mayor, and it was rejected by the neighboring mayor of Glendale and the Glendale Common Council. Both sites were rejected due to “not in my backyard or “NIMBYism” sentiments. State and local legislators and DOC officials must engage in community education at the beginning of their site selection process reassuring neighbors that a Type 1 facility does not make a community dangerous. There are many prisons located withing walking distance of residential housing,

schools, hospitals, and entertainment venues including many of these facilities locating in an area that already included a prison. Waupun Correction Facility, a maximum-security prison is in the center of the city of Waupun with residential homes right across the street from “the Walls.” Dodge Correctional Institute, John Burke Correctional Center and the Waupun State Prison farm are nearby as well. MSDF and the Milwaukee County Jail are blocks away from a K-12 school, a hospital, newly developed Brewery Point Senior housing and near the Fiserv Forum and the Deer District, along with many other businesses and tourist destinations in Milwaukee. Taycheedah Correctional Facility is just one mile from a private high school, and closer to a hospice facility. Private homes are literally on the other side of the security fencing. We must not allow this nimbyism with the faulty narrative of danger stop us from finding a suitable location for the Type 1 facility. The same Milwaukee youth who would be housed in a Type 1 facility are currently held in the county juvenile detention center in the basement of the Vel R Phillips facility less than two miles from top medical facilities in Wauwatosa. The area surrounding the detention facility continues to see growth in hotels, restaurants, and residential housing even though the detention center is within walking distance of these establishments. The youth facility does not make the neighborhood dangerous. We cannot allow this narrative to be repeated and impede the closure of Lincoln Hills.

FCAB and other groups supporting both the closure of Lincoln Hills and keeping the Chaney Center open in its current location have, without any official charge, engaged in a process to identify an alternative site for the Type 1 facility. We are committed to both saving the Chaney Center and assisting in finding a more appropriate location for the Type 1 facility. We have been working with Anthony Foster, a local Milwaukee realtor with [Frost Realty](#), to identify potential site for the Type 1 facility that meets DOC’s requirements: 8-10 acres, access to transportation/bus routes, agreement regarding the location by advocates and elected officials, and community acceptance. We have identified several possible sites that meet the first two criteria and are ready to take the next steps to bring elected officials and community members to the table to talk with them about the facility. However, more time is needed to do this. FCAB encourages the Department of Corrections to engage in a community process much like was done 22 years ago when the Chaney Center was built in the Sherman Park neighborhood. Surely there is room in Milwaukee for both retaining the Chaney Center in its current location as well as the new Type 1 juvenile facility. Further, the Felmers Chaney site does not meet the 8–10-acre requirement activists were given for site identification. In fact, the Chaney Center location is only 3.86676 acres - two and a half times smaller than the size of the site Sec. Carr has asked FCAB and community activists to identify for the new facility.

While the state legislature is out of compliance with the statutorily deadline to close Lincoln Hills youth prison not once, by twice, the motivation to close the youth prison without thoughtfully planning, including community engagement, should not occur simply as an economic development and job creation plan. We should not be building, prisons, opening prisons or imprisoning our fellow brothers and sisters in any capacity as a means to preserve jobs or expand employment in Lincoln County and reopen Lincoln Hills as an adult facility. Our criminal justice policy should be enacted on issues of community safety. The wisdom of expanding our capacity to imprison an additional 500 men in our state, 215 miles and three hours away from Milwaukee County, where

28% of them will be returning, should be examined a bit more closely, but that is a different fight for a different time.

Before any further action is taken to raze the Chaney Center, we ask that DOC provide full transparency and disclosure of plan for building the Type 1 facility at that site and the cost and estimated timeframe for rehabilitating MSDF including the approved funding to do so.

We urge Governor to appoint a committee to work with DOC to explore appropriate sites for Type 1 facility. Milwaukee County, the city of Milwaukee, activists, impacted children and their families, and community members, should be fully engaged and cooperate with DOC to explore and identify an appropriate site for the Type 1 facility. We also ask that DOC explore the former Ethan Allen School as a possible site for the new Type 1 facility and request that DOC be transparent by sharing full reports of this exploration. Similar to the rationale for using the Chaney Center site, DOC owns the land, and they can do with it what they want. Given the [prototype](#) developed for the Type 1 facility, it would be one building located on an 8-10 acre site. It would not require utilization or renovation of the entire footprint of the former Ethan Allen School site. In addition, there would be no additional cost to purchase land or rehabilitate MSDF; an opportunity for the legislature to demonstrate good stewardship of taxpayers' money. In the absence of DOC, Milwaukee County and the city of Milwaukee leaders ability to identify an appropriate site in Milwaukee County, other than the Felmers O. Chaney site, activists are in support of locating the Type 1 facility at the former Ethan Allen School location.

The members of the Felmers Chaney Advocacy Board stand firmly against any plan to close the Felmers O. Chaney Center and to reduce the number of pre-release center beds in Milwaukee. In fact, we call for additional pre-release center beds to be provided in Milwaukee. The reduction of mass incarceration and the restoration of returning citizens, families, and communities depend on it. Milwaukee County should not be forced into choosing between an essential pre-release center or a youth prison that will allow children to have more contact with loved ones. FCAB encourages members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety to oppose SB 520 until the Wisconsin Department of Corrections has identified a suitable location for the Type 1 facility that does not raze the Felmers O. Chaney Center. We are here to assist in that effort.

Respectfully submitted,

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