

**Office of the Controller**

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**TO:** Josh Siegel, County Executive;  
Lehigh County Board of Commissioners

**FROM:** Controller Mark Pinsley

**DATE:** April 7, 2026

**SUBJECT:** Proposed Regional Juvenile Detention Agreement and Local Alternatives

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Lehigh County is currently evaluating whether to enter into a long-term agreement to participate in a regional juvenile detention facility, including a proposed partnership with Berks County, to secure guaranteed access to detention beds. This matter began under a prior administration, and several agreements and discussions are already in motion. The process is underway. That said, it is not complete. The current administration still has the ability, and in my view, the obligation, to review the data and determine whether a long-term commitment is justified before proceeding further.

The proposal under discussion would commit the County to a regional model designed to ensure consistent bed availability. The question before the County is whether that approach reflects the actual need.

Based on the available data, the issue does not appear to be a shortage of overall bed capacity. The County's detention usage reflects a small number of youth requiring placement at any given time, typically for short durations. The operational challenge is not volume. It ensures reliable placement when needed and appropriate care once a youth is placed.

Framing this as a capacity issue risks leading to the wrong solution.

If proximity to families is not being treated as a deciding factor, then the County should be evaluating two separate questions before making any additional bed commitment. First, whether the County can negotiate with another provider for the level of service it needs. Second, whether bringing these services under government control would actually produce a higher standard of care.

That distinction matters because the core issue is not simply the number of beds. The real issue is the quality of the services being delivered within those beds. That includes the quality of staffing, training, supervision, and compensation. If another provider can meet those standards through negotiation, then a long term capital commitment may not be necessary. If, however,

direct government control would materially improve the standard of care, that case should be made clearly and with evidence.

The financial analysis should also reflect the full picture. While removing the private profit layered on top of staffing costs may create savings, the proposal also involves a 20 year bond commitment. That extended repayment period lowers the annual payment enough to make the proposal appear less expensive, or close in cost, compared with what is being paid now. But the County would still be assuming a long term financial obligation, and that obligation should not be justified on cost presentation alone.

To be financially prudent, the proposal should show that the annual payments are manageable. It should also compare the current provider cost structure against the County's projected costs and, more importantly, show that the County would achieve a meaningfully higher standard of care. Without that, the question remains whether the County is solving a service quality problem or simply taking on a long term debt obligation without sufficient justification.

If, on the other hand, proximity to families is considered important, and evidence suggests it should be, then the County's approach should reflect that priority. Distance directly affects family visitation, stabilization, and reentry outcomes. If that factor is given weight, then solutions should be pursued that keep youth closer to home rather than relying on a distant regional facility.

In either case, the issue is not beds. It is service level and system design. A long-term agreement raises additional concerns. The County does not yet have sufficient clarity regarding future demand, long-term cost exposure, or performance outcomes under a regional model. Entering into a decades-long commitment under these conditions creates financial risk and limits the County's ability to adapt as better or more cost-effective alternatives emerge.

Accordingly, I recommend the following:

1. Pause any long-term commitment to a regional detention agreement until a full evaluation is completed.
2. Direct administration to assess whether existing providers can meet the County's needs through negotiated service levels, including defined staffing standards and compensation.
3. Evaluate options that maintain proximity to families, including local or near local solutions, where that factor is determined to be material.
4. Develop clearer projections of demand, cost, and outcomes before entering into any agreement that would bind the County beyond the near term.

This is a limited-use, high-consequence function. The County should ensure that any long-term financial commitment reflects actual need and preserves flexibility going forward.