

September 9, 2025

Bea Rector, Interim Secretary of DSHS  
Angela Ramirez, Incoming Secretary of DSHS  
1115 Washington Street SE  
P.O. Box 45600  
Olympia, WA 98504-5600

RE: Public Comment: Incorporating SB 5393 into Chapter 410, Laws of 2025 - Closing the Rainier school  
by June 30, 2027

Dear Interim Secretary Rector and Incoming Secretary Ramirez:

As the current and incoming leaders of the Department of Social and Human Services, we appreciate your individual histories of advocacy for vulnerable communities, including people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We are writing today regarding the current public comment period related to the bill that passed this past legislative session to close admissions Rainier School (SSB 5393). Please find attached the complete public comment that we formally submitted on September 5, 2025.

We believe any future use of the Rainier School campus that moves away from the existing outdated institutional model of care for people with developmental disabilities would align with both civil rights principles and evidence-based best practices. We are commenting as The Arc of Washington State, established in 1936 with a mission to promote and protect the human and civil rights of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The Arc has seven affiliated local chapters across Washington state who join in this public comment including The Arc of King County, The Arc of Snohomish County, The Arc of Whatcom County, The Arc of Spokane, The Arc of Tricities, The Arc of Grays Harbor, and The Arc of Cowlitz.

Earlier this year, SSB 5393 became Chapter 410, Laws of 2025 entitled "Closing the Rainier school by June 30, 2027." To implement the law, the Department of Social and Health Services will limit new admissions to those with a short-term need starting in July 2025 and stop new admissions July 1, 2027. The department is directed to provide meaningful options to all current residents who choose to transition to another RHC or to the community. If they choose to transition to a community location, they may request to return to Rainier School for up to one year afterwards, which is not considered a new admission. Rainier School will cease to operate when the census reaches zero.

Below is our response to the four questions posed by DSHS during the ninety-day public comment period asking how to mitigate the effects of closing Rainier School at an unspecified future date and any potential impacts of the sale, transfer, or alternative use of the property. In addition to the future closure of Rainier School, it's important to know that Rainier School also provides water treatment services to the City of Buckley. The City of Buckley received grant money to study other water treatment services options in the future; this study is expected to be completed in 2027.

This transition away from institutional care for people with developmental disabilities is a moral imperative. It is backed by decades of research, policy recommendations, and lived experience. Thank you for your continued advocacy and the opportunity to share our public comment with you. We look forward to continuing to work closely together to support people with developmental disabilities being fully included in our communities.

*For people with intellectual and developmental disabilities*

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Very truly yours,



Stacy Dym  
Executive Director  
The Arc of Washington State

cc: David Frockt, Grace Huang, Sjan Talbot

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Attachment: Public Comment on SSB 5393

**Public Comment on SSB 5393: Closing the Rainier School**

Submitted via Public Comment [Response Form](#) on September 5, 2025

Submitted by The Arc of Washington State on behalf of The Arc of Washington State, The Arc of King County, The Arc of Snohomish County, The Arc of Whatcom County, The Arc of Spokane, The Arc of Tricities, The Arc of Grays Harbor, and The Arc of Cowlitz.

**QUESTION 1: What suggestions do you have for an alternative use of Rainier School campus?**

We believe any future use of the Rainier School campus that moves away from the existing outdated institutional model of care for people with developmental disabilities would align with both civil rights principles and evidence-based best practices. We write this comment as strong advocates for evidence-based, person-centered care for individuals with developmental disabilities. We recognize the complex economic and infrastructure considerations, including the impact on the local community of Buckley, that must also be addressed thoughtfully in any future planning for this state-owned property. However, the state must not allow these logistical concerns to delay the closure of Rainier School or impede our progress towards a more just, compassionate, and inclusive system of care for people with developmental disabilities.

The Rainier School campus represents significant state assets that could serve other vulnerable populations more effectively and comprehensively. The current campus utilization represents a significant underuse of state resources. Any alternative use should maximize the productive capacity of this substantial state investment. The Rainier School population peaked at 1,918 residents in 1958. Today it has about 77 residents (under 80). This contrast underscores the significant need for more comprehensive use of the facility by a different population or an alternative use.

Alternative uses for this state-owned property could include space for residential facilities, medical and therapeutic infrastructure, educational buildings, recreational space, transportation access, and significant acreage in a desirable rural setting.

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We envision that there are several other populations that could benefit from the comprehensive potential of this setting, including:

- Buckley community center, youth camp/public camping space, playfields, etc.
- Veterans requiring long-term care and rehabilitation services
- Individuals experiencing chronic homelessness needing intensive support
- Young adults aging out of foster care requiring transitional housing and services
- Individuals with complex behavioral health needs
- Senior citizens requiring specialized care
- Juvenile rehabilitation or other youth populations that could benefit from a campus structure

As the state creates a process to conduct the phased closure of Rainier School, we recommend including the following steps:

1. Conduct comprehensive assessment of infrastructure and adaptive reuse possibilities
2. Engage stakeholders including Buckley residents, current employees, disability advocates, and potential service populations
3. Maintain state employment levels through workforce transition planning
4. Preserve water rights management responsibilities to Buckley
5. Ensure any new use provides comprehensive services that justify the campus' scale and infrastructure

**QUESTION 2: Do you have any recommendations or strategies you would like to share for mitigating the impact of closure?**

The transition away from institutional care for people with developmental disabilities at Rainier School represents both a moral imperative and a complex logistical challenge. Success will be measured not only by improved outcomes for individuals with developmental disabilities, but also by how effectively the state protects the economic stability of Buckley, preserves meaningful employment for dedicated state workers, and maintains essential municipal services.

In planning for the closure, we believe that the state must: (1) first and foremost prioritize person-centered planning for residents (2) create a workforce transition plan and (3) address water rights and revenue management. Proper planning and adequate resources can both modernize disability services and honor the state's broader responsibility to the Buckley community and state employees who have long supported a very vulnerable population.

*(1) Prioritize Person-Centered Transition Planning: Supporting long-term residents of Rainier with developmental disabilities through person-centered moves must be the number one priority and must include planning for families, case managers, providers, and advocates to ensure a safe, respectful, and successful transition from Rainier School to a community-based setting. Washington state has for decades supported hundreds of previous residents and families during successful transitions from RHC to community-based care through previous closures of ICF facilities and through individual moves facilitated by the federally funded Roads to Community Living program. Washington state knows how to do this properly. These steps can be found in numerous legislative reports.*

These are some specific transition planning guidelines, outlined in numerous legislative reports from 2019 through 2023, and they feel critical to highlight:

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1. Pre-Planning and Assessment (6–12 Months Before Move)
2. Home Selection and Readiness
3. Trial Visits and Adjustment Planning
4. Continuity of Quality and Person-Centered Services and Supports.
5. Move Coordination and Logistics
6. Post-Move Follow-Up (at least for the first 90 Days, 120 Days, 1 year)
7. Oversight and Quality Assurance.

*(2) Economic Impact Mitigation for the Community and State Employee Workforce:* We recognize that the facility provides substantial state employment for Buckley residents and that maintaining state-sector jobs supports the local economic base. We imagine that any transition should protect existing employment where possible. We strongly encourage incentives for current state employees who move into the community-based care workforce. And if the facility is used for alternative populations, then state jobs may be preserved, albeit state employees would have to be retrained for a new population. Retraining state employee skills for a new use of the facility should be included in future legislation that directs alternative uses for the campus.

*(3) Water Rights Revenue and Sustainable Funding Models:* Rainier School operates a self-managed water utility system that serves its campus and parts of the surrounding community, including the City of Buckley. Revenue generated from this system (through water sales and management contracts) is currently directed in part to support state DD services. While this model has provided auxiliary funding, it ties critical service dollars to the continued operation of a large institutional facility. This is neither sustainable nor aligned with modern service delivery priorities.

This transition is an opportunity to build a more stable and equitable funding model, one that is not dependent on an outdated institution or its utility infrastructure. We understand from some public documents that in FY 2023, for example, Rainier's water system may have generated approximately \$1.4 million in gross revenue, a portion of which was credited toward operations that support developmental disability services through cross-account transfers in the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) budget. As the state facilitates the closure of Rainier School, we must also ensure that funding for developmental disability services is not diminished in the process and that we replace or restructure this water revenue in a way that continues to support essential programs for people with IDD.

There are several pathways forward:

1. Earmark proceeds from water rights transfer or lease agreements to continue supporting developmental disability programs. If the City of Buckley or a public utility district acquires the water rights, part of the negotiated agreement can ensure that proceeds are directed into the state's DD budget or a dedicated trust fund.
2. Create a reinvestment mechanism where any financial gains from the repurposing of Rainier School's property - whether through sale, lease, or shared development—are redirected back into the community-based developmental disabilities system, ensuring that funding for services remains strong during and after the transition.
3. Leverage this opportunity to demand sustainable general-fund investment in disability services. If the current water revenues have been used as a patch for inadequate state funding, now is the time to fix that imbalance permanently. The people who rely on these services deserve stable, recurring funding that isn't tied to legacy infrastructure.

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We fully support protecting and sustaining the financial commitments made to people with developmental disabilities. At the same time, we cannot allow that commitment to justify the continued use of outdated institutional models. We must not leave behind the funding that sustains these services. Any transition of water rights should be done responsibly—with a public process and fiscal safeguards to ensure that community-based support is enhanced, not compromised. This is not about losing funding—it's about modernizing how we fund a system that reflects our values today. A phased closure presents a chance to reimagine how we fund services in a way that is transparent, equitable, and fully aligned with civil rights principles. A responsible, transparent, and equity-focused approach to continued management or the transfer of Rainier's water rights is a separate and critical issue to resolve.

### **QUESTION 3: What impacts of Rainier closing are you concerned about?**

Years of legislative debates and partial closures have created instability for the remaining residents and their families at Rainier School. Most of the current problems seem to come from years of delays and uncertainty rather than the closure itself. The constant back-and-forth has made it harder to plan proper community alternatives and individual transition plans for long-term residents. Delays in committing to closure have created infrastructure issues like the water rights problem and have prolonged creating a training plan for state employees to transition to a different population or for working in community-based settings. The challenge with the closure plan now is making sure the timeline doesn't rush residents into inappropriate placements without the investment in community-based care and careful, personalized planning that the current residents need to succeed in the community.

The closure of state institutions for adults with developmental disabilities is a deeply sensitive and complex issue that affects the lives and rights of vulnerable individuals. Because of the ethical implications and potential for harm if not handled with nuance and care, it is important to ensure that the closure plan is thoroughly informed by evidence, legal context, and most importantly, the voices of people with developmental disabilities and their families – both those who currently reside in institutional care and those who *could* reside and receive such care. People have strong opinions from every aspect of stakeholder interest, whether a family member, guardian, person with a disability, provider, state agency employee, subject matter expert, or community leader. Most often, it is a legal guardian who is either a parent, family member, or professional guardian making decisions on behalf of someone with developmental disabilities and their transition to the community – it is all too often not the individual who stands to be most affected by the decision.

The state must consider modern research and historical “reconciliation” of the past treatment of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Washington state in order to take a rights-centered approach to policy that supports increased investment in inclusive, person-centered services. While some institutions have provided necessary care in the past, **we now have the capacity and responsibility to offer something better:** person-centered, inclusive services that support individuals to live, work, and thrive in the communities of their choice.

**Community-based services—when properly funded and supported—lead to improved outcomes in health, autonomy, and social connection. States that have closed institutions and reinvested in community living have seen people with disabilities gain greater control over their lives, establish deeper relationships, and participate more fully in society.** This approach is consistent with federal policy, including the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark *Olmstead v. L.C.* decision, which affirmed the right of individuals with disabilities to receive care in the least restrictive setting appropriate. It also aligns with the core values of dignity, equity, and self-determination. Institutions like Rainier School, by design, isolate individuals from everyday life and limit autonomy, personal growth, and connection. Numerous studies have shown that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities experience better quality of life, better health outcomes, and greater independence in smaller, community-integrated homes with the right support services. **Washington must honor the spirit and mandates of the Olmstead decision.** We are long-passed due for aligning Washington's service system with federal law by closing state-run institutions and investing fully in home- and community-based services (HCBS).

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*Achieve with us.*

To be clear, transitioning from institutional care must be done thoughtfully, with careful planning and individualized support. Families and individuals should be included in the process, and no one should be left without the services they need. But we must not allow fear or inertia to delay progress toward a more just and inclusive system. We urge the state to take bold and compassionate action by actively moving toward closing Rainier RHC and investing in the infrastructure, workforce, and housing necessary to support all people with developmental disabilities in community life. **This policy is not merely budgetary or logistical reform, but a long-overdue civil rights imperative. The continued operation of large, congregate-care state institutions runs counter to decades of research, national disability policy, and the voices of self-advocates and their families.**

Moreover, this transition must be **deliberate, individualized, and well-resourced**. It wisely includes provisions for person-centered planning, workforce development, and robust community capacity building—elements essential for a safe, respectful, and successful transition. We understand that some families may feel apprehensive about this change, especially those with loved ones currently residing in institutions. Their concerns must be heard, honored, and addressed. However, **no one should have to choose one form of care over another because of an underfunded system that fails to follow research and civil rights law**. It is time for Washington to join the growing number of states that have recognized that institutional care is outdated, expensive, and inconsistent with modern disability values of dignity, inclusion, and self-determination.

As disability rights advocates, we support closing institutions because **we first and foremost are listening to the people who have lived in one or might be sent to one in the future**. This is not just a systems reform—it's a vision for what Washington can be: a state that values inclusion, reallocates resources equitably, and listens to the voices of people with disabilities who have said for decades, "We want to live in the community."

#### **QUESTION 4: Any other comments**

The Arc of Washington State and its affiliated local chapters including The Arc of Whatcom County, The Arc of Snohomish County, The Arc of King County, The Arc of Cowlitz County, The Arc of Grays Harbor, The Arc of Spokane, and The Arc of Tricities, which support thousands of individuals and families across Washington, strongly support the phased closure of Rainier RHC. This transition is not only a moral imperative. It is backed by decades of research, policy recommendations, and lived experience.

Institutions, by their nature, separate individuals from their communities, limit personal choice, and can foster environments that perpetuate isolation and neglect.

The Rainier School campus represents valuable state assets that can better serve Washington residents through alternative uses aligned with evidence-based practices and civil rights principles. The current campus utilization represents a significant underuse of state resources and flies in the face of current research on outcomes and civil rights protections for people with developmental disabilities. Any alternative use should maximize the productive capacity of this substantial state investment. A thoughtful transition process can honor the economic needs of Buckley, protect state employment, and redirect these resources toward other populations who could benefit from comprehensive residential services delivered in a more appropriate and effective manner.

-END-

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