Big changes are coming to Wisconsin’s juvenile justice system in the years ahead, with a $80 million infrastructure investment that will shift how young offenders are housed and treated.

“We are no longer going to have to rely on a huge, one-size-fits-all system,” says Evan Goyke, one of the legislators who led the work ahead of this year’s passage of the transformative AB 953. Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker supported the bipartisan, bicameral effort. “We are adapting our system and taking a smaller, regional approach to juvenile facilities.”

Under the new law, by 2021, a large correctional facility in northern Wisconsin must be closed. Located far away from any of Wisconsin’s major population centers, this facility has been the subject of numerous complaints of abuse and neglect and a federal investigation; in addition, the recidivism rate among juveniles housed there has been high.

But Wisconsin’s new vision for juvenile justice took a significant investment from the Legislature. For example, the existing facility in northern Wisconsin will be replaced with a smaller one for juveniles who have committed the most-serious offenses. The Legislature authorized $25 million in borrowing to build this facility. Another $15 million will go to doubling the size of an existing mental health treatment facility in the state’s capital city.

Youths who are not high-level offenders and who don’t need intensive mental-health treatment will be housed in local facilities, thus allowing more young people to be closer to their homes and families.

Part of AB 953 provides state funding for $40 million in grants for local governments to build or modernize these local facilities, including detention centers and residential care centers.

“There are often less restrictive ways of treating juvenile offenders,” Goyke says, noting that various provisions in AB 953 reflect a better understanding of young people’s developing brains and the problems caused by trauma. For example, the new residential care centers will deliver evidence-based treatments and trauma-informed care.