

# The Star-Ledger

## **Dozens suspended at N.J. prison after officers are accused of beating women inmates**

By Blake Nelson and Joe Atmonavage

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published Jan. 25, 2020

Dozens of staff have been suspended and a criminal investigation is underway at New Jersey's only women's prison after officers were accused of severely beating several women inmates earlier this month, according to state and union officials.

Prisoners have told family members and advocates that at least three women at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility were hurt by officers Jan. 11, including one inmate who now has a broken eye socket and a transgender woman beaten so badly she cannot walk and is now in a wheelchair. The family members and advocates have shared letters and other first-hand accounts with NJ Advance Media.

The corrections department is reviewing the alleged violence with the Hunterdon County Prosecutor's office and the state attorney general's office, according to prison spokeswoman Liz Velez.

"The Department is fully aware of the allegations of use of force, and will not tolerate such behavior," Velez wrote in an email. "If wrongdoing is found, the Department shall address it in an expeditious and appropriate manner."

She added that the department may also run an internal investigation to "take appropriate action to hold people accountable."

Velez declined to comment further, but she did not dispute details in a summary of accounts from prisoners provided by NJ Advance Media, including that one woman was allegedly handcuffed before she was beaten, and that a Special Operations Group, which is similar to a SWAT team, was involved.

About 30 officers, supervisors and other staff have since been put on "administrative paid leave," according to William Sullivan, president of NJ PBA Local 105, the state's largest corrections union.

The women's prison in Clinton was already under heightened scrutiny since the U.S. Department of Justice found that officers repeatedly sexually abused prisoners, and lawmakers have criticized the prison system's response.

"I am horrified by the allegations out of Edna Mahan" and "my heart breaks for the victims of this attack," Assemblywoman Yvonne Lopez, D-Middlesex, said in a statement.

The incident showed the department was still failing to protect women, she added.

Lopez has previously called for all prison officers to wear body cameras and she helped pass legislation to strengthen the corrections ombudsman, an independent prison watchdog. She said the new allegations made her concerned the ombudsman's office was still not able to effectively police prisons.

The ombudsman, Dan DiBenedetti, said the incident went beyond the day-to-day complaints his office normally reviews.

"This is a criminal investigation being conducted by law enforcements agencies," Dan DiBenedetti wrote in an email. "This office provided all information received from inmates, families, and inmate advocate groups in order to aid in the investigation."

A spokesman for the Hunterdon County Prosecutor directed questions to the state attorney general's office. An attorney general spokesman said their Office of Public Integrity and Accountability was looking into the accusations.

One transgender woman was allegedly handcuffed in her cell, thrown to the floor and beaten by a group of officers, according to the woman's mother, Trimeka Rollins. Three officers stomped on her head, Rollins said, based on messages she received from her daughter two days after the incident.

The attack left the woman's knee so damaged she is now in a wheelchair, according to a message to Rollins reviewed by NJ Advance Media.

"I'm scared, I'm scared to death for her," Rollins said. "I don't sleep, I don't eat, I'm on the phone, I'm on the internet, I'm trying to find her some help."

She asked that her daughter's name not be used to protect against retaliation.

Her account is similar to descriptions from four other prisoners, including details in two letters obtained by NJ Advance Media.

Both said at least three women were hurt, including one whose eye socket was fractured.

Prisoner rights advocates have also received calls and letters during the last two weeks, and some have written lawmakers and state officials to raise the alarm.

"Each of you are guilty for not stopping the unconscionable conditions of confinement in this state which have gone on for decades — with this being one of the most egregious," Bonnie Kerness, program director for the nonprofit American Friends Service Committee's prison program, wrote in one message to Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks and a wide range of officials and lawmakers.

The state attorney general's office asked anyone with information about the incident to call 1-844-OPIA-TIPS.