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N.J. prison leader should step down while reports of beatings at women's prison are investigated, lawmakers say

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State senators on Monday demanded the head of New Jersey's prison system be placed on leave in response to an NJ.com story detailing accusations that officers severely beat inmates at the state's only women's prison earlier this month.

State Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg, D-Bergen, and Sen. Linda Greenstein, D-Middlesex, said they'd lost faith in the people overseeing the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Clinton.

"We are appalled by the egregious acts reported today," the senators wrote in a letter to Gov. Phil Murphy. "This is not the first report that shows that the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility is out of control, improperly managed, and clearly an abusive danger to the women locked up behind its walls."

Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks and Edna Mahan's warden should step aside until the incident can be fully investigated, the lawmakers said.

"Wardens" are called "administrators" in New Jersey's prison system. The corrections department lists Sarah Davis as the facility's administrator, but she was on leave when inmates said they were attacked, according to William Sullivan, president of NJ PBA Local 105, the state's largest corrections union.

The person who had been in charge, Associate Administrator Sean St. Paul, was previously suspended, Sullivan said.

Messages left with St. Paul were not returned.

On Monday the prison system appointed a new administrator, Patricia McGill, according to an internal memo obtained by NJ Advance Media. The document noted her long experience with the corrections system but made no mention of the ongoing investigation.

Representatives for Murphy and the prison system did not respond to requests for comment.

A total of 30 officers and supervisors have been suspended and the state attorney general's office is investigating the alleged beatings, state and union officials said. One transgender woman told her mother she was handcuffed in her cell and thrown to the floor so officers could stomp on her head.

The U.S. Department of Justice previously found evidence that officers sexually abused inmates.

“Time after time, crisis after crisis we’ve seen how the Administration handles our State Prison population and oversees the county jails — yet another F grade,” state Sen. Mike Testa, R-Cumberland, wrote in a message to NJ Advance Media.

“A bipartisan review of the New Jersey Corrections system is well overdue,” he said. Testa called for the corrections commissioner to step down last year over his handling of the pandemic behind bars.

Weinberg and Greenstein, who have overseen hearings about alleged abuse behind bars, also asked the governor’s office to increase oversight of the women’s prison and to “create an independent review board for the facility, including former inmates, to confidentially receive complaints.”

Furthermore, they said federal investigators should expand their earlier review.

The lawmakers asked the governor to respond to their letter within the next two weeks.