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Demands for suspension of N.J. corrections commissioner grow after women inmates report beatings

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Pressure mounted Tuesday for the head of the prison system to step down while law enforcement investigates alleged beatings at the state's only women's prison.

Five more New Jersey lawmakers on Tuesday demanded Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks be placed on leave the day after an NJ.com story revealed that dozens of staff at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Clinton were suspended after women inmates said they were attacked by officers earlier this month. Two other lawmakers said the same late Monday.

"We are outraged by the allegations of physical assault perpetrated by correctional personnel," state Assemblywoman Yvonne Lopez, D-Middlesex, and three colleagues wrote to Gov. Phil Murphy.

A total of 30 people have been suspended at the prison, according to William Sullivan, president of NJ PBA Local 105, the state's largest corrections union.

That includes 20 officers, 9 supervisors and Associate Administrator Sean St. Paul, who was in charge on Jan. 11, when prisoners said officers severely beat at least three women.

Messages left with St. Paul were not returned.

A new administrator, Patricia McGill, was appointed Monday, according to an internal memo obtained by NJ Advance Media.

The Hunterdon County Prosecutor's Office and the state attorney general's office have confirmed they are looking into the allegations.

"No one who took part in these attacks, or stood by and watched them occur, has any place working in our correctional system," state Sen. Sandra Cunningham, D-Hudson, said in a statement. "We have seen far too many instances, especially at this facility, of corrections officers abusing inmates for no reason at all."

U.S. Sen. Robert Menendez said in a statement that "These are serious allegations that should be immediately investigated by the appropriate state authorities," although he did not call for the commissioner to leave.

A Murphy spokesman called the accusations "extremely disturbing" but said the governor stood by the commissioner.

“Governor Murphy is committed to getting to the bottom of what happened here and he supports Commissioner Hicks’s ongoing initiatives to promote greater inmate safety, increased transparency, and to hold the facility’s staff to the highest standard of professionalism,” Jerrel Harvey wrote in an email.

“In no uncertain terms, the Governor believes that those who mistreat individuals in state custody must be held fully accountable.”

A total of seven state lawmakers have now asked Murphy to suspend the corrections commissioner, including Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg.

Murphy’s office also responded to Weinberg Monday evening.

“We understand this is an issue of paramount concern to you and hope to update you with more information as it becomes available to us,” Murphy’s legislative affairs director, Paulina Banasiak, wrote in an email obtained by NJ Advance Media.

In the message, Banasiak also shared an earlier statement from the corrections department promising that if “wrongdoing is found, the Department shall address it in an expeditious and appropriate manner.”

The women’s prison was already under fire since a U.S. Department of Justice report found that officers repeatedly sexually abused prisoners, and lawmakers said the alleged beatings were the last straw.

Lopez’s letter also asked the governor to suspend the corrections ombudsman, the man in charge of an independent prison watchdog. Advocates have previously raised concerns that the ombudsman’s office was not equipped to effectively police prisons.

The ombudsman, Dan DiBenedetti, did not respond to a request for comment on the letter, but he previously said he and his staff were passing along information they received about the reported beatings to prosecutors.

Other lawmakers who have called for the commissioner to step down are Democratic Assemblywomen Pamela Lampitt, D-Camden, Eliana Pinter Marin, D-Essex and Valerie Vainieri Huttel, D-Bergen. State Sen. Mike Testa, R-Cumberland, called for the commissioner to resign last year over his handling of the pandemic.