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Murphy orders independent investigation into alleged beatings at N.J. women's prison. 'I am sickened by the horrific reports.'

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Gov. Phil Murphy appointed a special investigator Wednesday to review allegations of beatings at the state's only women's prison, NJ Advance Media has learned, as more lawmakers called for the head of the state prison system to step down.

The governor appointed A. Matthew Boxer from the firm Lowenstein Sandler LLP to investigate a Jan. 11 incident at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility, according to a statement sent by a spokesman.

"I am sickened by the horrific reports of what happened," Murphy said. "Let me be clear: every individual in state custody deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, and we must always remember that female inmates have long been uniquely vulnerable to abuse."

While he said he supported the actions Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks has taken so far, Murphy said "we must go further."

"Today, I am ordering a full independent investigation, under the direction of former State Comptroller Matt Boxer, to determine how this happened and make recommendations to prevent anything like it from ever happening again," Murphy said.

He said the report should be finished in an "expedited fashion" and "any individual who acted improperly will be held fully accountable."

Thirty staff have been suspended at the prison. One inmate told NJ Advance Media that she was beaten and sexually assaulted by a corrections officer during the attack. The Hunterdon County Prosecutor's Office and the state attorney general's office previously confirmed they launched a criminal investigation.

Earlier Wednesday, all seven Republican Assemblywomen demanded the prison commissioner resign or be replaced.

"The report of thirty officers and supervisors on leave because of allegations of abuse should stop all of us in our tracks," state Assemblywomen BettyLou DeCroke, R-Morris, and six others said in a statement. "This is not a few bad actors scenario. The continued abuses at the Edna Mahan demonstrate the need for further overhaul to cleanse the culture of abuse and bring justice to the women who endured these brutalities."

A total of 14 lawmakers from both political parties have now called for the commissioner to at least temporarily step down. The governor said Tuesday he was standing by Hicks and his reform efforts.

Boxer, a respected former federal prosecutor and state comptroller, has developed a reputation for deep-dive investigations into allegations of government misconduct. But those inquiries don't always see the light of day.

In 2015, then-Gov. Chris Christie's administration hired Boxer to investigate a host of discrimination and sexual harassment complaints and other misconduct at a New Jersey National Guard base. Christie's administration refused to release Boxer's report.

Boxer declined comment.