

# The Star-Ledger

## **N.J. prison leader should be removed in aftermath of alleged beatings, Senate Dems tell governor**

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New Jersey officials defended the head of the prison system as a growing bipartisan chorus on Wednesday demanded a change in leadership amid reports that officers severely beat women inmates earlier this month.

All of the state's 25 Democratic Senators signed a letter demanding that Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks lose his job, the caucus announced Thursday.

The lawmakers also asked the federal government to take over the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women in Clinton and demanded women inmates ultimately be moved to a safer prison.

The commissioner "has demonstrated time and again that he is not up to the task of running the Department of Corrections," the lawmakers wrote to Gov. Phil Murphy. "The violations of law and of basic human rights that have been allowed to continue under the leadership of Commissioner Hicks must end now."

Murphy so far has defended Hicks' ongoing reforms while also appointing a special investigator Wednesday to look into the allegations.

"I'm not only sick to my stomach, I'm extremely angry about this," Murphy said Wednesday on WNYC about reports of abuse.

Several female inmates reported being attacked by prison staff Jan. 11, and one woman told NJ Advance Media she was sexually assaulted by an officer.

Hicks first reviewed an initial investigation of the incident Jan. 14, three days after the incident, according to a spokeswoman. The commissioner then suspended staff who "may have had involvement" within "24 hours" and initiated an ongoing criminal investigation, prison spokeswoman Liz Velez wrote in an email.

Thirty-two staff total have been suspended, after two more were put on leave Wednesday, according to William Sullivan, president of NJ PBA Local 105.

Furthermore, Hicks and his staff have created a "Use of Force Committee" to review how officers use force, is expanding the use of surveillance and body cameras and plans to hire an Assistant Commissioner of Women's Services, among other reforms, according to Velez.

"Placing the Commissioner on leave will only serve to stall this progress," Velez said.

Dozens of lawmakers have said that wasn't enough, including many Republicans.

State Sen. Kristin Corrado, R-Passaic, added that the appointment of a special investigator was "beyond disappointing" because "New Jersey taxpayers will have to shell out for another expensive investigation because Governor Murphy's reaction is to circle the wagons rather than hold his team accountable."

All seven Republican Assemblywomen called for the commissioner to step down Wednesday.

The U.S. Department of Justice previously found evidence of rampant sexual abuse at the women's prison.

Acting U.S. Attorney for New Jersey Rachael Honig said her office and the justice department were "aware of these new, deeply troubling allegations."

"We are looking into them," Honig said in a statement Thursday. "We look forward to the continuing and complete cooperation of the state of New Jersey as we move forward."

*NJ Advance Media staff writer Matt Arco contributed to this report.*