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Boss of N.J. women's prison part of alleged attack, inmates say. He's been sued before.

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An administrator in charge of New Jersey's only women's prison, who inmates and relatives say played a prominent role last month when some women said they were beaten by officers, previously was accused of at least three separate cases of misconduct.

Inmates have sued Associate Administrator Sean St. Paul at least three times in the past seven years, according to federal court records. One said St. Paul broke his arm. Two others said he refused to stop officers from abusing other prisoners.

St. Paul also was suspended 20 days more than a decade ago for workplace discrimination, but after an appeal that charge was dropped, according to state records.

He is one of dozens of staff from the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility on paid administrative leave, according to William Sullivan, president of NJ PBA Local 105, the state's largest corrections union.

St. Paul is the highest-ranking person to be suspended so far from the Hunterdon County prison, state and union officials said. His position is below the prison's overall administrator, who was on leave before retirement.

Several prisoners and their relatives say St. Paul was part of a Jan. 11 incident when, inmates allege, they were brutally attacked by staff, according to three letters written by prisoners and interviews with two inmates and other family members.

One woman told NJ Advance Media she was sexually assaulted by an officer.

Lawmakers have since demanded the commissioner in charge of the entire prison system be fired, and the governor appointed a special investigator to look into the incident.

St. Paul could not be reached for comment.

NJ Advance Media called, emailed and messaged phone numbers, email addresses and a LinkedIn account listed for St. Paul throughout last week. Nobody answered the door Friday at a property St. Paul owns and a lawyer who represented St. Paul in the discrimination case said he no longer works with St. Paul.

A prison spokeswoman did not respond to a request for comment on St. Paul's role in the Jan. 11 incident or his record at the department.

'I heard a bone crack'

At least three male inmates in recent years have sued St. Paul, who previously worked in at least one men's prison in New Jersey.

Last year, a man accused St. Paul and two other officers of breaking his arm several years earlier, according to court records.

During a transfer, St. Paul was "standing on top of me" and "stomping kicking beating on me," wrote Douglas Manning, who is in East Jersey State Prison for multiple charges, including sexual assault and manslaughter, according to prison records.

Manning said St. Paul twisted his arm and "I heard a bone crack," according to the complaint. The lawsuit is ongoing.

A spokesman for the state attorney general's office, which represents the corrections department in court, declined to comment on that case.

In a 2018 complaint, Christopher Sperry said an officer beat him in retaliation for having filed a grievance.

Other officers soon arrived. St. Paul was part of a group that "either actively participated in the attack" or failed to intervene, according to the lawsuit.

Attorneys representing the corrections department have broadly denied his allegations in court. Sperry is in prison for robbery, and his attorney could not be reached for comment. The suit is ongoing.

A third male inmate said St. Paul "condones and supports" misconduct by officers he supervised.

Lemont Love said he once overheard St. Paul speaking with another staff member near a mail room, according to a 2015 lawsuit.

A "Code 33" was called, which is when officers are summoned to stop a fight or assist with an unruly prisoner.

When St. Paul was told which inmate was the target of the call, he allegedly replied, "He's getting f---d up, he's getting f---d up."

St. Paul also knew of complaints accusing multiple officers of abusive behavior but he "has failed to take disciplinary action against them or otherwise control their behavior," Love wrote.

Love is in prison for drug, assault and robbery charges, among others. He represented himself in the case, which was dismissed on procedural grounds.

Years prior, St. Paul was also suspended for 20 working days for violating the state's workplace discrimination policy, according to records from the civil service commission, a bipartisan agency that oversees public employment in the state.

After St. Paul appealed the 2007 charge, the punishment was dropped to a written reprimand and he was given 20 days' worth of back pay, records show. After another hearing, the written reprimand was thrown out too.

St. Paul then asked the civil service commission to give him more than \$37,485 to reimburse his lawyer, David Heintjes. The agency denied his request, according to the records.

When reached by phone, Heintjes said he did not recall what accusation St. Paul originally faced.

Full disciplinary files for officers are not considered public records in New Jersey and typically only surface through lawsuits and civil service appeals, so it's unclear whether St. Paul faced other discipline throughout his career.

The women's prison

In recent weeks, families of at least two of the women who were allegedly attacked say they had been trying to speak with St. Paul about complaints concerning several officers. The families hoped he would help.

"He assured me he would handle it," one mother, who asked not to be identified out of fear of retaliation for her daughter, told NJ Advance Media.

The other woman never heard back from St. Paul, the second relative said.

It's unknown if St. Paul addressed the complaints about verbal and physical harassment from officers.

In early January, there were also multiple instances of inmates throwing "fecal matter" at officers, according to Sullivan, the union official.

On Jan. 11, officers tried to move several women from their cells, Sullivan said.

Many details of the cell extraction are still unknown, and prison officials have so far declined to provide more information, citing the pending criminal investigation.

One inmate, Ajila Nelson, said a group of armored officers barged into her cell in the prison's Restrictive Housing Unit, where women are held for disciplinary reasons.

They punched and kicked her and stripped off her clothes while she was handcuffed, Nelson said. Other women also said they were hurt in the process.

In a phone interview last week, Nelson said she saw St. Paul present while she was being attacked.

She also alleged that another officer grabbed her breast and put his “fingers into my vagina.”

NJ Advance Media does not normally name victims of alleged sexual assault, but Nelson said she wanted to come forward to increase public awareness, especially since other women have reported abuse at the prison over the years.

The mother previously in contact with St. Paul said her daughter suffered a concussion, whiplash, a split lip, bruises all over her back and knots on her head from the incident.

“If the person that is supposed to help you when things like this go on is the person behind it all, then who do you turn to?” the mother said about St. Paul.

Two women reported that after the alleged attack St. Paul threatened future retaliation if they misbehaved.

St. Paul allegedly said, “they want to act up this will happen every night,” according to a letter written by an inmate. NJ Advance Media is not naming the letter’s author to protect her from retaliation.

St. Paul was placed on paid administrative leave Jan. 15, according to state and union officials.

He joined the state payroll in 1991 and was making \$128,195 as of September, according to online pension records.

He was appointed to a Prison Gang Violence Task Force in 2005, according to legislative records, and by 2018 he’d earned the rank of lieutenant and was working at Northern State Prison, union records show.

He was associate administrator at the women’s prison by the start of the pandemic, according to an internal memo.

The department announced a new Edna Mahan administrator, Patricia McGill, 10 days after staff were first suspended, according to another internal memo obtained by NJ Advance Media.

McGill was initially acting administrator and fully took the reins Monday, prison spokeswoman Liz Velez wrote in an email.

NJ Advance Media Research Editor Vinessa Erminio contributed to this report.