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## **3 N.J. officers charged after alleged assault at women's prison, could face years behind bars**

By Blake Nelson, Joe Atmonavage and S.P. Sullivan  
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Three officers at New Jersey's only women's prison have been charged with official misconduct and accused of other crimes after female inmates said they were severely beaten by staff last month, the state attorney general's office announced Thursday.

More charges against other officers could come as the investigation continues, state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said during a virtual press conference.

At least six women at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility have said they were hurt around Jan. 11, a higher number than previously reported, according to Grewal, interviews with two prisoners and relatives of three others.

"They were not treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve," Grewal said. "In fact, they were assaulted physically and violently."

One woman at the Hunterdon County prison told NJ Advance Media she was sexually assaulted by an officer, and others reported they were beaten so badly that one said she suffered a broken eye socket and cheek bone while another told her mother she was diagnosed with a concussion and had bruises all over her body.

Officials confirmed that one inmate had an "orbital fracture" and they said women also suffered psychological trauma.

Grewal added that the investigation was hampered by officers who lied and "attempted to cover it up by filing false reports about the incident, downplaying the seriousness of the incident and failing to document the true nature of the officer's actions that evening."

Two people charged were supervisors, who officials said failed to stop other officers from using excessive force.

Sgt. Amir E. Bethea, 35, of Springfield faces two counts of second-degree official misconduct and two counts of third-degree tampering with public records.

It was not immediately clear if Bethea has a lawyer, and two numbers listed for him did not work.

Sgt. Anthony J. Valvano, 38, of Bound Brook, was charged with second-degree official misconduct and third-degree tampering with public records.

Messages left at two numbers listed for Valvano were not immediately returned. A man did pick up at one of the numbers, but the line immediately disconnected after an NJ Advance Media reporter identified himself.

If convicted, an official misconduct charge carries a minimum of five years in prison.

Officer Luis A. Garcia, 23, of Nutley, was also charged with second-degree aggravated assault, second-degree official misconduct and third-degree tampering with public records, according to Grewal's office.

Garcia punched one woman 28 times around the face, despite the fact that she was trying to protect herself while pressed up against a cell wall, Grewal said.

Garcia's attorney, Robert Cannan, said his client "adamantly denies these allegations."

"He will plead not guilty and ultimately looks forward to complete vindication and restoration to his pay status and his career," Cannan said.

The allegations have prompted lawmakers to demand Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks lose his job.

Gov. Phil Murphy ordered an independent investigation into the incident.

In a statement after the charges were announced, Murphy thanked the attorney general for "taking swift action and filing criminal charges in the wake of the horrifying incident at Edna Mahan."

"Any abuse of power is abhorrent and violates the public trust, and can never be tolerated or excused," Murphy said.

A spokesman added in an email that, "Findings of the investigation and recommendations will be released publicly."

The prison commissioner has said he "fully supports" the independent investigation.

The department has "zero tolerance for anyone who defies our mission of operating safe and humane facilities," Hicks wrote to staff Jan. 29 in a memo obtained by NJ Advance Media. "Let me be clear when I say, my administration has ushered in a new dawn at the NJDOC."

Hicks suspended staff and initiated the criminal investigation days after the alleged beatings, according to a spokeswoman.

The incident began as an attempt to pull some inmates out of their cells and lasted into the early morning of Jan. 12, according to charging records.

The highest-ranking person to be placed on leave so far is Associate Administrator Sean St. Paul, who has previously been sued at least three times in recent years by inmates who said he either assaulted them or failed to stop violent officers.

Although St. Paul was not named, Grewal said Thursday that “we’re going to hold everyone accountable that contributed to the events of January 11 and January 12, regardless of where they fall on the chain of command.”

A total of 32 staff at Edna Mahan were put on paid administrative leave after the incident, according to William Sullivan, president of PBA Local 105, the state’s largest corrections union.

That includes two additional suspensions Jan. 27, he said, after dozens were initially removed Jan. 15. Half are men and half are women, Sullivan added.

There are about 330 officers total, not counting supervisors, who guard almost 400 women at the prison, according to the union.

Video of the incident shot by at least one officer and taken from at least one surveillance camera will eventually be released, Grewal said.

He also asked anyone with more information to step forward.

“The time to speak to our investigators is now,” he said.