

# The Star-Ledger

## **Broken bones, bloodied inmates: The inside story of a night of violence at N.J.'s women's prison**

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NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published Feb. 8, 2020

The officers wore riot gear and carried shields and canisters of pepper spray, according to inmates and prosecutors. They moved from cell to cell in formations of five down the long hallway of a special housing unit at New Jersey's only women's prison.

They were there for a series of "cell extractions," what normally are routine removals of unruly inmates as officers search for contraband.

Prisoners called it a planned attack.

"They were armored up because they knew what they were coming to do," said inmate Ajila Nelson, who said she was groped and assaulted.

"We were beat severely," said Desiree Dasilva, who was punched in the head and said an officer left a boot print on her arm.

State prosecutors also now are calling it a coverup, saying officers lied on official reports after authorities charged three of them with official misconduct and other crimes.

The Jan. 11 incident is at the center of a spiraling criminal probe at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women, a small prison in Hunterdon County with an outsized reputation for violence and sexual abuse.

More than 30 employees were suspended after inmates reported busted lips, bruised bodies, a broken arm, a fractured eye socket, a concussion and at least one allegation of sexual assault.

Over the past two weeks, NJ Advance Media has spoken directly with two of the women who alleged they were attacked, as well as family members of three others. The news organization interviewed current and former inmates, union officials and experts with knowledge of the prison's operations. It also obtained internal records and five letters from prisoners to family members and advocates.

What emerged was a portrait of a prison that, despite intense scrutiny brought by numerous state and federal probes in recent years, allowed officers to assault the very people they are sworn to protect, even when they knew cameras were rolling.

Worse, multiple inmates said, top Edna Mahan officials not only approved the violent extraction, they encouraged it.

“They want to act up,” a now-suspended administrator, Sean St. Paul, allegedly said of the inmates, “this will happen every night.”

St. Paul did not respond to multiple messages seeking comment.

State Attorney General Gurbir Grewal on Thursday announced three correctional police officers — including two sergeants — faced accusations of official misconduct and other charges for participating in or lying about excessive force against prisoners.

One officer allegedly punched a woman on the head at least 28 times as she was pressed face-first against a wall, desperately trying to shield her face from the blows.

At a news conference, Grewal said his office’s inquiry was hampered by “false or misleading reports filed by officers,” adding that investigators were moving quickly to figure out “who else, at any level of the prison’s hierarchy, was responsible for these criminal acts.”

The attorney general said six women had come forward so far and more charges were expected.

## **A VIOLENT ‘EXTRACTION’**

It’s unclear what officially prompted the extractions, but tensions were building for months at Edna Mahan, inmates, officers and advocates said.

The coronavirus already made the difficult work of corrections officers and the lonely, dangerous lives of prisoners exponentially worse. A single case of the deadly disease could sideline several employees and force inmates into quarantine units, blocked from contact with the outside world.

Officers also complained for weeks that a handful of inmates were throwing urine or feces at them, according to William Sullivan, president of NJ PBA Local 105, the state’s largest corrections union.

One inmate recounted three prisoners throwing food and garbage through the small “food ports” in the heavy metal doors of their cells in an act of protest in the hours before the extraction.

Housing 21 inmates inside the prison’s South Hall at the time of the incident, the Restorative Housing Unit’s name belies its true nature.

Inmates are sent to the “RHU” for any number of reasons, current and former prisoners said, but they typically end up there as a form of punishment. The environment can be chaos, where noises echo off the thick concrete walls and heavy metal doors, and troubled inmates lay on the floor and kick their doors.

Prisoners were complaining about their treatment long before Jan. 11.

Two inmates wrote in messages to family and friends that Sgt. Anthony Valvano, 38, one of the charged officers, had been denying women privileges like recreational time.

Nelson, the inmate who said she was sexually assaulted, claimed Valvano pepper-sprayed a number of inmates in the unit Jan. 7, a few days after her 30th birthday.

“He threatens to make our (lives) hell if we write him up or report him. He calls us bitches and is very disrespectful. I am tired of this man!!!!” Nelson wrote to her sister Jan. 8, according to a message obtained by NJ Advance Media.

Two messages left at numbers listed for Valvano were not returned.

Another letter obtained by NJ Advance Media from inmate Faith Haines, who was housed in the RHU and was removed from her cell, said the ordeal started when another prisoner returned from outdoor recreation to find that her cell had been searched.

NJ Advance Media is not identifying that inmate because she is an alleged victim and her family fears retaliation.

In protest, the woman began throwing food and garbage out of the food port in her cell door. She was joined by two others, who began throwing food, milk and debris through a crack in the door of the cell they shared, according to Haines’ account.

Prosecutors later confirmed that at least one woman threw an “unknown white liquid” out of her cell, citing surveillance footage.

Things escalated from there.

Sometime between 11 p.m. and midnight, Haines wrote, she saw “a lot of black helmets pass by my cell.”

Cell extractions are not uncommon in prisons, but when officers suit up to forcibly remove prisoners, it’s seen as a last resort, said Adrian Ellison, the president of the prison system’s internal investigators union, FOP 174.

“It’s very seldom that you find an inmate that is defiant and rebellious,” said Ellison, whose union represents investigators with the Special Investigations Division, known as SID.

“When it gets to that point, somewhere down the line, something failed.”

There are cameras in the hallways, but not the cells, of the RHU, according to inmates and staff, and state regulations require that cell extractions are videotaped.

Internal investigators used to man the cameras during cell extractions, Ellison said.

“That would put people in the frame of mind that you had some independent oversight,” he said. “And the video was not just to protect inmates, but to protect the officer, too. If the inmate did something wrong, it would be documented.”

But concerns about overtime costs during Gov. Chris Christie’s administration led the department to put that responsibility in the hands of supervisors at the prisons, Ellison said.

Prosecutors allege at least two supervisors, Valvano and Sgt. Amir Bethea, 35, led violent teams into the RHU that night.

The officers started at the door of the woman who allegedly threw food and garbage out of her cell. Records show the woman was convicted last year of throwing bodily fluids at a law enforcement officer.

“You cuffing up, or are we spraying?” Valvano asked the inmate, according to Haines’ account.

Officers then pumped pepper spray through the woman’s food port, the inmate said.

The prisoner’s mother later told NJ Advance Media officers “drug her out the cell with just her panties and bra on.”

“She was just crying” as she was pulled from the cell, her mother said.

State prosecutors said they were unsure if Bethea had retained a lawyer, and two numbers listed for him did not work.

Two officers entered the cell after the extraction, tossing items into plastic bags. It is common for officers checking for contraband to search cells and bag up property, though inmates claimed after the incident that officers wrecked belongings in the process.

The routine was repeated over and over, according to inmate accounts and court documents.

Desiree Dasilva, identified as “Victim 1” in court documents, immediately complied when officers tried to enter her cell.

They even handcuffed her as they entered, prosecutors said.

That didn’t stop at least one officer from “repeatedly” hitting her, according to state records.

“They were punching me, punching me, punching me,” Dasilva told NJ Advance Media in a phone interview. “I was begging them, ‘Please.’ I was seeing stars. I saw black boxes. I was begging and crying for them to stop.”

Prosecutors also concluded Dasilva was “begging officers not to harm her” as they beat her, court documents show.

Dasilva said she was dragged out of the cell as she was “dripping blood” out of her eye and nose.

Prosecutors said Dasilva was then wrongly placed in a unit for suicidal inmates instead of returning her to her cell, until a nurse checked her for injuries. She was sent to Hunterdon Medical Center, where she was treated for a broken right orbital bone.

In pictures provided by her family, Dasilva’s right eyeball is completely obscured by two swollen, purple eyelids protruding from a broken socket.

Her mother said Dasilva is now “afraid for her life, that they are going to kill her.”

The extractions continued in another part of the hall.

Emmalee Dent, identified in court documents as “Victim 2,” did not initially comply when officers ordered her to “cuff up,” documents allege. But, according to a criminal complaint, once officers opened the cell door, she surrendered.

It didn’t matter.

Officer Luis Garcia, 23, immediately entered and punched Dent in the head, according to a criminal complaint. Through his attorney, Garcia has denied any wrongdoing.

The woman threw her arms up to protect herself, prosecutors said.

He hit her again, according to the complaint.

She pressed herself against a cell wall and turned her back to the officers. He hit her again, prosecutors allege.

Then, they claim, he hit her 25 more times.

Haines, the inmate who wrote a letter detailing the extractions, said officers then came for her and her cellmate, both of whom surrendered willingly. They were placed in holding cages in the prison’s east wing, near Dent, whose khaki uniform was bloodied and lip was swollen.

Soon after, she said, Dent passed out.

But two officers who checked on her claimed Dent was “faking it,” refusing to call for medical care, according to Haines.

Medical staff later determined she suffered a concussion, according prosecutors, inmates and her attorney.

“We do not treat prisoners of war with the depravity that these officers acted with,” the attorney, Joel Silberman, later said.

While Thursday’s criminal charges stemmed from alleged assaults on just two inmates, authorities say they’ve identified at least six potential victims.

They include Ajila Nelson, the first prisoner to go public with her accusations. Nelson told NJ Advance Media a group of officers beat and punched her, stripped off her clothes, and one male officer grabbed her breast and put his “fingers into my vagina.”

A transgender woman housed in the unit told her mother in messages after the attack that she was handcuffed in her cell, thrown to the floor and beaten by a group of officers. Three officers stomped on her daughter’s head, said the woman’s mother, Trimeka Rollins.

She spent the days following the attack in a wheelchair, according to multiple inmates.

### **FALSIFIED REPORTS?**

After the beatings ended, prosecutors said, the coverup began.

Charging documents allege at least two sergeants, Bethea and Valvano, watched as officers they supervised, including Garcia, brutalized inmates.

Then, prosecutors claim, they lied about what they saw.

In his official report about the incident, Bethea “failed to report the unauthorized use of force against a restrained inmate, (Dasilva), who was not resisting,” despite the attack being caught on camera, according to charging documents.

“Bethea intended to deceive others within the DOC into believing that the use of force ... was justified,” the documents allege, using the acronym for “department of corrections.”

Prosecutors said Bethea watched as Garcia attacked Dent.

Garcia has been charged with aggravated assault, official misconduct and tampering with public records because state prosecutors accuse him of writing in a report that Dent “was throwing punches” during the extraction, a claim that a video recording allegedly contradicts.

Garcia's attorney, Robert Cannan, said his client "adamantly denies" doing anything improper.

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

Dent has filed notice with the state that she plans to sue for \$5 million in damages for her alleged abuse.

"Ms. Dent and the other women had no way to escape their abusers," her attorney said. "Their cries for help fell on deaf ears."

Valvano, the other supervisor, also lied about what he saw, according to charging records.

Not only did he fail to stop at least one officer from fracturing Dasilva's eye socket, Valvano instead reported that Dasilva had been "banging her head into the cell door," prosecutors said.

He allegedly went so far as to suggest that officers had to barge into her cell to stop her from hurting herself, according to charging documents.

The two sergeants were in turn supervised by Associate Administrator Sean St. Paul.

More than one prisoner said St. Paul was present throughout the operation.

Others also have accused him of misconduct. At least three male inmates have sued him in recent years, saying he either hurt them or failed to stop out-of-control officers.

St. Paul has not returned multiple requests for comment, and a spokeswoman for the prison system declined to answer a detailed list of questions about the incident, citing the ongoing investigation.

Grewal, the attorney general, said he expected his office to bring more charges, telling reporters, "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."

He offered a warning to Edna Mahan staff who witnessed the incident.

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

## **A LONG HISTORY OF ABUSE**

Nobody in power can claim they weren't warned.

A series of NJ Advance Media reports in 2017 and 2018 detailed violence, sexual abuse and exploitation of inmates at Edna Mahan going back decades, as well as a spiraling criminal probe by the Hunterdon County Prosecutor's Office that kept bringing new charges against officers.

Across two administrations — Christie's, followed by Murphy's — there were more than a half-dozen inquiries, from special counsel hired by the attorney general's office to legislative hearings that corrections officials skipped to a federal civil rights probe that produced a damning, detailed report.

The accusations kept coming. Public officials kept pointing fingers.

The federal inquiry, made public last April, laid bare a pervasive culture at the prison where officers coerce inmates into sexual acts, grope them during strip searches and "routinely" demean them as "bitches," "dykes" and other slurs.

"Some officers were candid in disparaging the recent focus on sexual abuse, based on the view that prisoners abuse the system," the report found, "and supervisory staff reinforced, rather than correct, this perception that sexual assault received undue focus."

Yet Murphy and corrections officials continued to claim the worst behavior happened under the "previous administration," saying they were cleaning up a mess left by Christie.

Over the past three years, new laws have been enacted. A new oversight board appointed. New policies put in place.

Yet prisoners say the violence and abuse continues.

"No, I wasn't surprised," former Edna Mahan prisoner Tawanna Murphy, 46, said about the newest allegations.

She is part of a class-action lawsuit against the prison, and during a phone interview she detailed a litany of physical and sexual abuse she said she suffered during her decades behind bars, including an officer forcing a kiss on her while she slept.

"This been goin' on since I was 19," she said.

Accusations of abuse at Edna Mahan have persisted so long that they led to the ouster of the former state corrections commissioner, Gary Lanigan, in 2018.

Now dozens of lawmakers on both sides of the aisle have called for Hicks, the current commissioner, to meet the same fate. One lawmaker moved Friday to impeach Hicks.

The prison system is implementing a range of reforms, a spokeswoman said, including expanding the use of cameras and creating a committee to oversee how officers use force.



The corrections department initiated the criminal investigation, Liz Velez wrote in an email, and with the new charges “we were able to quickly respond to the incident to hold these individuals accountable for their actions.”

They will also conduct an internal investigation, she said.

Hicks has not spoken publicly about the incident. But in a memo to staff obtained by NJ Advance Media, Hicks said he had “ushered in a new dawn” at the department, “one that has a zero tolerance for anyone who defies our mission of operating safe and humane facilities.”

The union that represents prison supervisors cautioned against a rush to judgment.

While the “allegations are somewhat troubling,” everyone deserve “a full and fair investigation,” said William Toolen, president of the New Jersey Law Enforcement Supervisors Association.

Many advocates said the state needs to do far more than make a few arrests.

The ombudsman’s office, an independent state watchdog, needed to be reformed, many said. Others brought up the possibility of a federal takeover of Edna Mahan and more civilian oversight.

Any changes will come too late for many women.

Nelson, the inmate who claims she was sexually assaulted by officers, said her time at Edna Mahan has taken a psychological toll.

“I went from never taking a medication to this place stressing me out so bad and doing so much stuff to me that now I have to take a medication to deal with the pain,” she said.

“This place is tearing me down, little by little.”

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