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Support for impeaching N.J. prison leader grows in wake of alleged beatings of women inmates

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A growing coalition of lawmakers have announced their support for impeaching the head of New Jersey's prison system amid a criminal probe into assaults against female inmates by staff at the state's only women's prison.

A bipartisan group of 10 women in the state Assembly said Thursday they'd support forcing Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks out of a job, which would be the first time in modern history the Legislature impeached a leader in the executive branch.

"The women at Edna Mahan Correctional Facility have been silenced for far too long while enduring unspeakable pain and suffering," state Assemblywoman Jean Stanfield, R-Burlington, a sponsor of impeachment, said in a statement.

"The women leaders of New Jersey will not back down on this issue until Commissioner Hicks is gone and new leadership can begin the healing that this administration has spectacularly failed at."

Six women at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women in Hunterdon County said they were hurt by officers in January, and one told NJ Advance Media she was sexually assaulted. Three officers have since been charged, and law enforcement leaders have said additional charges are likely. The state also continues to negotiate changes with the federal government since the U.S. Department of Justice found evidence of rampant sexual abuse behind bars.

Gov. Phil Murphy has so far stood by the commissioner, and a spokeswoman for the prison system has defended Hicks' ongoing reforms, including expanding the use of cameras behind bars and creating a new committee to review how officers use force.

Hicks has also helped save officers' lives, said William Sullivan, president of PBA Local 105, the state's largest corrections union.

While dozens of prison officers have died by suicide since 2005, nobody was lost last year, Sullivan said. He partially attributed that to Hicks supporting wellness programs including a suicide hotline for staff, access to gyms and better food, he said.

"I honestly think he's a great commissioner compared to what we've had in the past," Sullivan said Thursday.

He said his union has told the governor's office they generally support Hicks.

Two legislative sources said earlier this week that Murphy might be hesitant to fire the commissioner because of the union's support. They spoke on condition of anonymity to talk openly about discussions related to the governor's office.

A Murphy spokesman earlier declined comment.

The state Assembly is next scheduled to meet Feb. 18.

Democratic leaders have committed to hearings on the alleged beatings but have not yet signaled if they support impeachment.

Lawmakers plan to formally accuse Hicks of failing to take "reasonable measures to protect inmates from sexual abuse" and charge that he has violated prisoners' civil rights, among other issues, according to Assembly Republicans.

A majority of the state's 80 representatives would have to vote against the commissioner to trigger a trial in the Senate, according to New Jersey's constitution.

If it gets that far, there may be enough votes in the 40-person Senate for Hicks to be fired.

Two-thirds, or 27, would have to vote to convict, and at least that number has already said Hicks should step down.

All 25 Senate Democrats signed a letter demanding he resign, and at least two Republican senators, Declan O'Scanlon and Kristin Corrado have also spoken out against him, with Corrado specifically endorsing impeachment.

Calls for impeachment are rare.

Former Supreme Court Justice Peter Verniero faced calls for impeachment in 2001 following hearings on racial profiling in the State Police while he was attorney general, but the state Assembly declined to vote on it. Verniero retired from the court in 2004, two years before he would have been up for reconfirmation.

Another former attorney general, Zulima Farber, faced articles of impeachment for allegedly interfering with a traffic stop involving her boyfriend in 2006, but resigned before any formal action was taken.

The measure against Hicks is supported by seven Republican and three Democratic assemblywomen.

The articles were first proposed by Stanfield and have since gained support from Assemblywomen Valerie Vainieri Huttler, D-Bergen, Nancy Munoz, R-Union, Shanique Speight, D-Essex, Britnee Timberlake, D-Essex, Aura Dunn, R-Morris, Holly Schepisi, R-Bergen, BettyLou DeCroce, R-Morris, Serena DiMaso, R-Monmouth and DiAnne Gove, R-Ocean.

NJ Advance Media staff writers Brent Johnson and Joe Atmonavage contributed to this report.