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N.J. Senate calls for corrections commissioner to step down in overwhelming vote

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The New Jersey Senate voted overwhelmingly Friday for a resolution calling for the head of the prison system to lose his job amid a growing outcry over a series of alleged beatings at the state's only women's prison.

At the same time, lawmakers in the state Assembly finished drafting articles of impeachment against the commissioner, according to a copy obtained by NJ Advance Media.

State senators voted 35-0 to support a federal takeover of the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Hunterdon County, the eventual transfer of all women inmates to a safer facility and the ouster of Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks.

The resolution (SJR108) is largely symbolic, but adds to the growing pressure on Gov. Phil Murphy to take action beyond just appointing an independent investigator.

"The violations of law and of basic human rights that have been allowed to continue under the leadership of Commissioner Hicks must end now," the bipartisan resolution said.

Six women have said they were injured by staff last month, and one woman said she was sexually assaulted. Three officers have been charged in an ongoing criminal probe, and the prison system continues to negotiate reforms with federal investigators since the U.S. Department of Justice concluded sexual abuse was rampant behind bars.

"Commissioner Hicks has blood on his hands and it is unacceptable that over a month after the attack he has yet to take responsibility for his failures as commissioner and resign," state Sen. Dawn Marie Addiego, D-Burlington, said in a statement.

State Sen. Kristin Corrado, R-Passaic, added that "it will be impossible to restore trust in the corrections system" without new leadership.

An impeachment proposal accuses Hicks of engaging in a "pattern and practice of disregarding and violating the civil rights" of inmates.

The proposal will be introduced Monday by state Assemblywoman Jean Stanfield, R-Burlington, a legislative spokesman said.

Ten Assemblywomen have endorsed impeachment. If more than 40 eventually sign on, it would only take 27 senators to convict Hicks, a smaller number than voted Friday for his ouster.

A prison spokeswoman has defended the commissioner's ongoing reforms, including increasing oversight of how officers use force and expanding the use of cameras behind bars. The president of the state's largest corrections union has said Hicks' support of officer wellness programs has also reduced staff suicides.