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Inmate at troubled N.J. women's prison injured again after accusing officers of brutal attack

By Blake Nelson

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An inmate in New Jersey's only women's prison was hospitalized with a concussion Thursday after an altercation with officers, according to officials and medical records, just a month after she reported being one of several women beaten by staff.

Rae Rollins, who is 25 and transgender, told her attorney that officers at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Hunterdon County pushed her into a wall and maced her last week.

The state's largest corrections union said Rollins was the aggressor. Four officers and a supervisor were attacked and had to be treated for "minor injuries," according to William Sullivan, president of NJ PBA Local 105.

In response to questions about the newest incident, prison spokeswoman Liz Velez wrote only that "The Department cannot comment on an active investigation or medical care."

Rollins' account of being assaulted by officers in January was the first allegation published by NJ.com about that incident, based on messages she'd sent family and an interview with her mother, but her name had not previously been public. The allegations triggered a growing criminal probe and calls for the head of the prison system to resign.

During a phone interview the day before her hospitalization, Rollins told NJ Advance Media she was comfortable with her name being used in the interest of a full accounting of what happened last month, and she gave previously unreported details about her experience.

At least six women have said they were brutally attacked by staff during a series of cell extractions, including one who said she was sexually assaulted. Charges against a fourth officer were announced Tuesday and the governor has appointed an independent investigator — all while state officials continue to negotiate reforms with the federal government in the wake of a U.S. Department of Justice report that found evidence of rampant sexual abuse behind bars.

The growing scandal led a bipartisan group of lawmakers in the state Assembly to endorse impeaching Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks, and the state Senate voted overwhelmingly Friday for a resolution calling for Hicks to step down.

Rollins said the January attack forced her to use a wheelchair to get around the facility, an account verified by other prisoners. On Feb. 18, she stood up from her chair during a disagreement with staff over who would help move her to another part of the prison,

according to her lawyer, Oliver Barry. Officers later pushed her into a wall and used mace, he said.

That same day she was admitted, treated and released from the Hunterdon Medical Center, according to Kathleen Seelig, a hospital spokeswoman. Seelig declined to give more details, citing patient privacy.

But discharge paperwork obtained by NJ Advance Media shows that Rollins was diagnosed with a concussion, a hand “contusion,” elevated blood pressure, cervical strain and knee and wrist sprains.

More details about the altercation are still not known.

Barry said he planned to further investigate after meeting with Rollins on Tuesday, and he said she was still comfortable with her name being used.

‘You’re lucky’

Rollins first entered the prison system on a robbery charge in June 2019, according to state records, and she said she was transferred to Edna in October.

Her months at the women’s prison have been tense, she told NJ Advance Media on Feb. 17.

She was involved in a fight with another inmate in early January, according to records kept by the corrections union. Rollins said she was not seriously injured then.

Rollins said officers had also gone into cells earlier in the year to remove some inmates’ shampoo and water bottles, which can be used to spray liquids at staff. The union has said officers have been hit with bodily fluids in recent weeks.

Around midnight Jan. 11, officers in riot gear arrived on her hall, Rollins said. She believed it was for another routine search.

Officers asked her to “cuff up,” she said, so she placed her hands behind her back and through the food port in her cell. After she was handcuffed, officers opened the door and she got on her knees facing away from them, she said.

One officer then pushed her to the ground with a shield, and others began punching and kicking her, she said.

Rollins said she was not fighting, but she heard at least one officer yell “stop resisting.” State officials have confirmed part of the incident was filmed, and Rollins said she believed the words “stop resisting” were an attempt to create an audio record that suggested she was fighting back.

Rollins said she did try to get away after an officer wrapped his hands around her neck and squeezed, making her feel like she was going to black out.

Officers also kicked her in the head about four times, she said.

While cell extractions are common in some facilities, they rarely happen at the women's prison, according to Sullivan. During an interview earlier in the month, he said he hadn't reviewed any video or written testimony but said anything that went wrong may partially be due to officers' lack of experience with extractions.

Rollins echoed other inmates' accounts that an associate administrator at the prison, Sean St. Paul, was present throughout.

"This is gonna happen every night until the officers feel comfortable," St. Paul allegedly said last month after the extractions, according to Rollins. Another inmate previously quoted St. Paul saying almost the exact same thing.

Rollins said she asked St. Paul why he allowed the violent extractions.

"You're lucky," St. Paul allegedly said. "Did you know what happened to everybody else?"

St. Paul was suspended after the incident and has not responded to requests for comment, including a question Friday about the above quotes. Prison representatives have previously declined to comment on St. Paul's alleged role or provide more details about the incident, citing the ongoing investigations.

Rollins said she was later diagnosed with nerve damage around her left knee, and is now undergoing physical therapy. An X-ray showed no broken bones but she now has persistent headaches and needs a wheelchair, Rollins said.

She does have to walk on her own in the prison's recreation area, because wheelchairs are not allowed there, Rollins said.

When asked what the atmosphere inside the prison has been like since the extractions, Rollins said she and other accusers were being filmed whenever they moved outside their cells.

"It's definitely more tense, the only difference is they feel like they can't do what they want at this moment because everything's under a microscope," she said the day before she was taken to the hospital. "There's pretty much nothin' nobody can do at this point."

NJ Advance Media staff writers Joe Atmonavage and S.P. Sullivan contributed to this report.