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Inmates at N.J.'s women's prison filed thousands of complaints in recent months, new data shows

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Inmates in New Jersey's women's prison formally raised concerns about conditions behind bars thousands of times in recent months, a new report said, the highest rate in the state.

Staff at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility were also repeatedly late responding to those complaints, and no other prison had a higher share of delays, according to New Jersey's Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson, an independent watchdog.

More than 120 grievances hadn't even been opened during a recent audit of the Hunterdon County facility, which is already the focus of a criminal probe, an independent investigation and a federal report about alleged abuse.

Women in Edna Mahan filed nearly 3,900 grievances within the Corrections Department's Inmate Remedy System during a 12-month period. That's an average of more than 7 grievances per inmate, according to data from the ombudsperson's office and the Corrections Department.

Grievances can be filed on paper or digitally and can cover a range of issues. The ombudsperson's office said they sometimes involve only a question to staff, not a complaint, although inmates are supposed to ask questions on a separate form.

A prison spokeswoman said delays at the women's prison were due to the high volume and because multiple grievance forms sometimes referred to the same problem.

"To remedy this we've assigned a Superintendent to review and assist with this" and other issues, Liz Velez wrote in an email, referring to one of the top-ranking people within a facility.

The report covered Oct. 1, 2019, through Sept. 30, 2020, meaning the data included the period when dozens of prisoners died with the coronavirus, but it did not capture the aftermath of a series of alleged beatings last month that led to charges against four officers.

Grievances are generally supposed to be addressed within 30 calendar days, according to the report.

In October, investigators took a look at how many times staff had failed to meet that deadline just as of the end of that month.

At the women's prison, inmates had not received responses 52 times, according to the report. No other prison had a larger share.

It's possible other grievances were also late, but the audit only checked their status at the end of the year.

Furthermore, 121 grievances at Edna Mahan hadn't been opened at all.

Only one other prison had a higher percentage, and the vast majority had no unopened complaints.

In addition, staff statewide didn't always directly answer complaints, investigators wrote. Inmates would sometimes be told only that a grievance had been received, without any follow-up information about whether the problem was addressed.

The report also flagged a "major concern" about how prisons handle appeals.

If an inmate disagrees with a staff member's decision, they are allowed to file an appeal. But the same employee often handles that appeal, the report said.

"An appeal by definition is an application to a higher authority," investigators wrote. "An appeal should never be responded to by the person rendering the initial decision."

The number of appeals could not be calculated, so it is unknown how many of those cases are pending, the report added.

Prisoners and their loved ones can also raise concerns directly with the ombudsperson's office.

Women at Edna Mahan said they were harassed by staff more than three dozen times during the 12-month period, according to the report. There were three reports of staff assaults, two allegations of sexual harassment and one report of a sexual assault by a state employee.

Prisoners also said they were harassed or attacked by other prisoners multiple times, the report said.

Administrators and supervisors generally handle grievances and officers do not review them, according to William Sullivan, president of NJ PBA Local 105, the state's largest corrections union.

It's not possible to immediately compare these numbers with other years, because the ombudsperson's office only created this review after lawmakers passed a bill requiring more public reporting.

NJ Advance Media staff writer Nick Devlin contributed to this report.