

The Star-Ledger

Inmate sues to be transferred out of troubled N.J. women's prison

By Blake Nelson

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

Published March 22, 2020

An inmate in New Jersey's only women's prison is suing to be transferred to a county facility, the latest fallout from a series of alleged beatings that so far has led to charges against eight officers and demands for the prison commissioner to lose his job.

Rae Rollins, who is 25 and transgender, was one of several women who said they were beaten in January by staff at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility. In the aftermath, many state lawmakers have also called for women to be moved out of Edna Mahan.

Rollins has continued to experience "derogatory, homophobic, and transphobic verbal abuse" behind bars, according to the complaint, and one officer called her a "faggot" before spraying her with a "chemical irritant."

The lawsuit, filed Friday in Hunterdon County Superior Court, also asks for an unspecified amount of money to compensate for Rollins' injuries.

While the state has just one female prison, county jails are also equipped to house women.

Prison spokeswoman Liz Velez declined to comment.

In an interview last month with NJ Advance Media, Rollins accused officers of hitting and kicking her late Jan. 11 and early Jan. 12 during a series of cell extractions. She recounted similar details in the lawsuit.

After being handcuffed during a cell extraction, she was "slammed to the ground and struck multiple times, sustaining injuries to her lower extremities and head," according to the complaint. That attack forced her into a wheelchair "due to difficulty walking," the complaint alleges.

The next month, another altercation with officers left her hospitalized with a concussion, according to medical records.

In signed testimony, Rollins said she was "being transported in a wheelchair to a legal call" on Feb. 18 when she asked that an officer "who had repeatedly antagonized me" not move her.

When that same officer started pulling her wheelchair anyway, Rollins said she tried to stand up.

“I was grabbed, thrown against the wall, and was ultimately thrown on the ground before being struck with blows and chemical irritant,” she said in the lawsuit.

“I experience dizziness, headaches, and blurred vision since this incident,” Rollins added.

The state’s largest corrections union, NJ PBA Local 105, has disputed that account. Rollins was the actual aggressor and four officers and a supervisor had to be treated for “minor injuries,” according to union president William Sullivan.

That second incident is under investigation, the prison spokeswoman previously said.

The lawsuit also described a third, unreported confrontation.

Early this year, “an officer grabbed my wrist and twisted my arm forcefully” and then pushed me into a water cooler, Rollins wrote.

When Rollins complained, a supervisor told her to “let it go” or she would be punished, according to the lawsuit.

She was later charged with “destruction of property” and “threatening an officer in relation,” the complaint said.

The criminal probe into the January incident is ongoing, and New Jersey continues to negotiate reforms with federal investigators since the U.S. Department of Justice concluded sexual abuse was rampant behind bars.