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Protesters demand N.J. women's prison close as outcry against alleged beatings grows

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Nobody could remember a rally ever happening outside New Jersey's only women's prison.

Saturday may have been the first.

About 80 people gathered on a grass field in Clinton to protest abuse behind bars, part of a growing outcry since six women said they were severely beaten by officers at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in January.

Some former prisoners at the event said it was their first time back since their release, including Tiera Piercy-Hollis, who wept as she recalled beatings she said she witnessed and received. That violence had permanently scarred her life, she said.

"I was supposed to be somebody," Piercy-Hollis said into a microphone.

"You are," the crowd shouted back.

Eight officers have been charged so far with assault or covering up misconduct, and the January incident has triggered lawsuits, an outside investigation and articles of impeachment against the head of the prison system. State lawmakers plan to launch hearings April 8, and the Senate voted last month to move the approximately 400 women elsewhere.

That resolution was symbolic but the vote, 35-0, was overwhelming.

"Shut 'em down," the crowd chanted Saturday.

The prison sits in Hunterdon County, about 15 miles east of the Delaware River. Down the road from the rally, concrete barriers and a white SUV and Jeep blocked the entrance.

New Jersey Prison Justice Watch, a coalition of activists, religious leaders and former prisoners, asked attendees to wear red. There were red Air Jordans, red hoop earrings and at least one red doo rag. A man wore a red and white Colin Kaepernick jersey while a woman held a poster with "Stop Prison Abuse" written in red glitter paint.

Part of the afternoon felt like a family reunion. R&B and Maya Angelou pumped from a portable speaker, and advocates embraced under pine trees.

There was one tense moment when women spotted a man they said worked as an Edna Mahan officer.

“We don’t want you here,” somebody shouted.

The man quietly said he wanted to support the rally. Marshall “Justice” Rountree, a former prisoner who helped organize the event, told him his presence was too traumatic for survivors of abuse. The man walked away.

Pressure has been building for years.

State data shows that Edna Mahan has the highest rate of inmate complaints in New Jersey — and the highest rate of staff delays responding to those complaints.

In recent years several officers have been charged with sexually abusing women, charges bolstered last April by a U.S. Department of Justice report that found evidence of rampant sexual abuse behind bars.

Many women are speaking about their experiences for the first time, event organizers said.

During a public Zoom meeting Friday, four shared horrific stories of assault and neglect. More took the microphone Saturday to name women they said died behind bars and list officers they said regularly broke the law.

One also named staff members who had shown her compassion.

Several people said this felt like a rare opportunity for reform. An organizer called on the attorney general’s office to also investigate men’s prisons, and the crowd demanded Gov. Phil Murphy take a more active role.

“Governor Murphy, where are you?” Cuqui Rivera, with the Latino Action Network, asked the crowd.

“Where are you!” dozens shouted back.

Murphy has so far defended the prison commissioner and asked for patience while an outside law firm investigates.

During the protest, about a dozen State Police cars and SUV’s sat across a nearby intersection, lights flashing. Troopers directed traffic as people walked to and from the field, and organizers praised the officers for their help.

Emily Parker spent part of the afternoon standing on a corner, wearing a “Free Them All” face mask and holding a handmade sign that read, “Love Safety Justice.” Her friend

Paige Greenfield held a piece of a cardboard that said, “end the complicity.” Both used to be classmates at the nearby North Hunterdon High School.

“I grew up in Clinton, and I’m ashamed at the fact that I was not aware of all that was going on,” Parker said.

“Our history class didn’t cover this,” Greenfield added.

A man sitting at a red light scowled at their signs and shouted something drowned out by traffic.

Parker said some people had heckled them, but many seemed supportive.

When a moving truck drove by around the same time, the driver honked and raised his fist.

Speeches wrapped up around 3 p.m. Within a half hour, the last red shirt had left the field.

The Jeep blocking the prison entrance moved aside and the road was open.