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N.J. agrees to pay almost \$21 million to settle sexual abuse claims at women's prison

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New Jersey has agreed to pay almost \$21 million to several women who said they were sexually abused while incarcerated at New Jersey's only women's prison and to other former inmates, officials announced Wednesday.

The agreement still needs approval from a state Superior Court. If that happens, money will also be set aside for former prisoners who have not yet come forward with claims of abuse, said Oliver Barry, an attorney representing women who filed civil lawsuits.

The settlement would provide more than 20 women who said they were sexually abused in recent years with about \$9.8 million, according to Barry.

The agreement will also improve conditions at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Hunterdon County by enforcing officers' use of body cameras while allowing women "to turn the page on this difficult chapter," according to a statement by several lawyers involved in the case.

The head of the state prison system said the settlement represents New Jersey's commitment to running "humane facilities."

"My administration is ushering in a new era in corrections, with safety and rehabilitation at its core," Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks said in a statement.

The settlement is unrelated to allegations that staff severely beat several women in January, an incident that has led to charges against eight officers, an outside investigation and calls for the commissioner to step down or face impeachment.

Wednesday's announcement came a day before Hicks is scheduled to appear before lawmakers to face questions about the January incident.

State Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg told NJ Advance Media the agreement "is just further evidence of an institution in crisis where a culture of abuse has been allowed to fester for years."

Weinberg said she's asking state officials to provide more information about officers accused of misconduct and civil lawsuits facing the prison system.

Documents detailing the \$20,835,600 agreement were not immediately available.

In addition to the \$9.8 million for sexual abuse claims, inmates who suffered verbal harassment could apply for up to \$4,500, and other women who have yet to come

forward with at least some evidence of sexual abuse would be able to receive up to \$250,000, according to Barry.

New cases would eventually be considered by a mediator known as a “special master” who has not yet been appointed, Barry said.

Furthermore, anyone imprisoned in Edna Mahan from 2014 through the present could be eligible for more than \$1,000, regardless of whether they were personally attacked, he said. The settlement would also cover attorneys’ fees.

The facility began equipping officers with body cameras this month, and state officials continue to negotiate reforms with the federal government since the U.S. Department of Justice found evidence last year of rampant sexual abuse behind bars.

A prison spokeswoman did not immediately respond to questions about the agreement.