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Shuttering N.J. women's prison after decades of abuse is one option 'on the table,' top official says

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New Jersey may consider shutting down the state's only women's prison in the wake of new allegations of abuse behind bars, the head of the state's corrections department told lawmakers Monday.

An outside consultant will take a close look at whether to keep the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Hunterdon County open after decades of documented misconduct by staff, Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks said during a three-hour budget hearing before the Assembly Budget Committee.

"That is on the table," Hicks said, but he did not offer any further details and stressed that closure was just one of many changes that will be explored by the consultant.

At a wide-ranging hearing where the commissioner was often the focus of lawmakers' attention, Hicks confirmed that a prisoner recently died after contracting Legionnaire's disease from contaminated water, and he defended how he's managed soaring overtime costs and allegations of sexual abuse by officers.

"There's no doubt in my mind that we're on the right track," Hicks said, when a lawmaker asked how he felt about the state Senate overwhelmingly demanding his resignation.

Lawmakers pressed him as to why the department's budget has remained around \$1 billion despite dramatic decreases in the number of people locked up statewide.

While about 25,000 people were locked up a decade ago, only around 12,800 remained at the beginning of the year, according to state data.

Hicks ticked off the tens of millions of dollars saved by recently closing one Trenton prison, the Central Reception and Assignment Facility, and he said they're preparing to shutter another, the William H. Fauver Youth Correctional Facility in Hunterdon County. No plan exists yet for the empty buildings, he added.

Assemblyman John Burzichelli, D-Gloucester, said that money was largely offset by overtime costs, a concern lawmakers have raised for years.

"The savings is being eaten up," Burzichelli said.

Hicks said they've hired a consultant to help reform how they schedule officers.

The commissioner also said more than four thousand New Jersey prisoners, officers and staff have been vaccinated against the coronavirus in a system that once had the highest COVID death rate in the nation.

There are around 19,900 prisoners and full-time employees overall, and Hicks said he hopes to eventually get to a 70% vaccination rate.

Lawmakers repeatedly returned to recent allegations that staff severely beat several women in January at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility.

More than 30 employees were initially suspended. Ten who have been criminally charged were kicked off staff, Hicks said. Others remain suspended with pay, Hicks said, including the then-head of the facility, Sean St. Paul, who has been repeatedly sued by prisoners in recent years.

To off-set staffing shortages from the suspensions, several officers were brought over from another nearby prison and given a week-long training about caring for female prisoners, Hicks said.

He also announced a new Assistant Commissioner of Women's Services: Helena Tome, who previously directed re-entry services for the New Jersey Association on Correction. The Trenton-based nonprofit operates halfway houses and drug treatment programs. She will work out of Edna Mahan and be in regular contact with prisoners, Hicks said.

He added that the recent settlement agreement to pay nearly \$21 million to women who said they've been sexually abused behind bars in recent years was not included in the current budget.

In addition, the department was looking to expand grants given to community organizations that help people reenter society, Hicks said.

Lawmakers also briefly questioned the head of the parole board.

More than 400 parole officers are now supervising about 16,000 people, "the highest number in the history of this agency," Chairman Samuel Plumeri testified. He said he did have the staff and budget he needed, even after recent large-scale prison releases.