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N.J. still months away from getting body cameras to all officers at troubled women's prison, top official says

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All officers at New Jersey's only women's prison should have body cameras by the fall, Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks said Tuesday during his first public appearance before state senators since those lawmakers voted overwhelmingly for his ouster.

Hicks also defended his department's soaring overtime costs before the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee, while deflecting questions about allegations that staff severely beat several women early this year at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Hunterdon County.

Lawmakers struggled to reconcile the reforms Hicks described with the fact that 10 officers have been criminally charged so far at a facility that already had a long history of sexual abuse.

"I think you've failed," said state Sen. Dawn Addiego, D-Burlington. "Do you really think that you are the credible advocate for this department?"

Hicks said the changes he's made, including an internal warning system to flag problem officers, would eventually bear out.

"I am a change agent," Hicks said. "I absolutely believe that this administration is the right administration."

State Sen. Declan O'Scanlon, R-Monmouth, said it was an "outrageous failure" that the approximately 200 cameras hadn't already been deployed. The commissioner responded that cameras were being used in many important areas but that it took time to roll out a system that can handle voluminous amounts of footage.

Lawmakers also pressed the commissioner on how taxpayer money is being spent on shrinking prisons.

Populations have declined for years, but a law that recently set thousands of people free months ahead of schedule contributed to the most significant drop in a decade.

However, the money spent has hardly budged. The combined prison and parole budget remains around \$1 billion every year.

Overtime costs have even climbed.

In fiscal year 2019, the department paid \$40.9 million in overtime, according to legislative records. That shot up to \$59.5 million the next year, and may hit \$81.6 million in the current fiscal year.

Hicks acknowledged the overall rise but disputed the \$81.6 million number. He said the true amount was about \$16 million less.

The reason for the discrepancy was not immediately clear. A parole spokesman confirmed that their overtime costs are not included in the above numbers, and a prison spokeswoman didn't respond to a question sent last week about why the amounts were different.

Nonetheless, officials have blamed the increased overtime on staffing shortages due to the coronavirus. Hicks also said they are having difficulty recruiting new officers and keeping the staff they already have.

He added that millions of dollars will eventually be reimbursed by the federal government because of the pandemic.

The senate vote in February calling for Hicks' resignation was largely symbolic, and Gov. Phil Murphy has stood by the commissioner.

But while Hicks has not stepped down, there have been significant staff changes around him.

In February, officials announced a new head of the department's Equal Employment Division, which investigates discrimination complaints, as well as a new Assistant Commissioner of Administration.

In March, the deputy commissioner was also replaced.

Two of those changes came after the state's largest corrections union complained.

In one case, PBA Local 105 wrote that the deputy commissioner made "hasty and reckless operational decisions" that put "the health and safety of ... Correctional Police Officers in jeopardy," according to a March 3 letter obtained by NJ Advance Media.

A prison spokeswoman said union pressure did not force anyone's hand.

"The changes you noted ... are a result of nothing more than filling vacancies opened as a result of natural attrition and retirements, not disciplinary actions," Liz Velez wrote in an email.

New Jersey is considering renovating or replacing the women's facility, although it's unclear where the hundreds of women inside would go, and officials continue to wait for

the U.S. Department of Justice to finalize an agreement that will likely lead to federal oversight of Edna Mahan.