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Prison officers would get body cams, inmates could more safely report abuse under proposed N.J. bills

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New Jersey lawmakers are making a renewed push to equip prison officers with body cameras and want to add safeguards to prisoners who report abuse, the latest fallout from a growing criminal probe at the state's only women's facility.

Democrats in the state Assembly are advocating for six bills, half of which were first introduced earlier this week, according to a Friday announcement.

"Cultural change and additional accountability and oversight are needed to safeguard the basic human rights of these inmates," state Assemblyman Raj Mukherji, D-Hudson, said in a statement.

Mukherji and other lawmakers held a marathon hearing last month about the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Hunterdon County, where 10 officers have been charged with either attacking prisoners or covering up misconduct. The prison is likely to come under federal oversight since the U.S. Department of Justice concluded sexual abuse was rampant behind bars.

The bills are all scheduled to be debated Tuesday by the Assembly Judiciary Committee.

If they are eventually passed by the full Legislature and signed by the governor, they would apply to all facilities.

Three were introduced Wednesday, according to legislative records.

One bill (A5750) requires the prison system establish a "secure, reliable, and confidential method" for prisoners to report complaints of sexual assault, harassment, violence and mental abuse by staff.

State officials have said there are already multiple ways to anonymously raise concerns, but some current and former prisoners have said current systems are inadequate.

Prisoners have also told NJ Advance Media that they're sometimes transferred to a different area or made to change their job after complaining about an officer. The bill would make it a fourth-degree crime to retaliate against someone who files a complaint.

A second proposal (A5751) would expand officer training. Lawmakers proposed 20 additional hours focused on de-escalation, culture diversity, implicit bias and communication skills.

A third bill (A5749) would ensure internal prison investigators receive special training for sexual assault allegations.

Anyone working in the Special Investigations Division would have to be schooled in techniques for interviewing sexual abuse victims and collecting sexual abuse evidence behind bars. They would also have to recuse themselves if they have a personal relationship with an employee under investigation.

Three other bills were proposed last year but hadn't made it out of committee.

One proposal (A5039) would require all prison officers wear body cameras.

New Jersey has introduced body cameras at two facilities. About 65 have been deployed at the women's prison, but officials are still months away from getting about 200 cameras total up and running, according to prison representatives.

Equipping officers at every prison with a camera would cost about \$26 million, according to spokeswoman Liz Velez.

Another bill (A4681) would allow more prisoners to be released to halfway houses.

Currently, people are eligible when they are a year or two away from the end of their sentence. The proposal would expand that window to about two-and-a-half years, although certain people, like sex offenders, would generally be left out.

Finally, a proposal (A4785) would mandate that anyone released from county jails receive an identification card, weeks-worth of prescription medication and other items to help them transition back to free society.

The law already requires state prisoners receive the same support.

The Assembly Women and Children Committee will meet again next month to consider additional proposals, according to a press release.

A prison spokeswoman didn't immediately respond to a question about what elements of the proposals may already be in effect.