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Prison officers would have to wear body cams under bill passed swiftly by N.J. panel

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A group of New Jersey lawmakers swiftly approved several prison reforms Tuesday, including a mandate that all officers wear body cameras behind bars and a new criminal penalty for staff who retaliate against prisoners making complaints.

The six bills passed the Assembly Judiciary Committee in less than an hour without a single “no” vote, including some proposals that had stalled for months.

Many were directed at the state’s only women’s facility, which is likely to soon come under federal oversight and where 10 officers have been charged in a growing criminal probe over alleged beatings.

“There seems to be a culture that we’ve seen where there are coverups rather than ... accountability,” said state Assemblyman Raj Mukherji, D-Hudson. “We have to send a message that it will be taken seriously.”

Each bill will need to pass the full Assembly and Senate in order to head to the governor’s desk.

One (A5750) requires the establishment of a “secure, reliable, and confidential method” for prisoners to report abuse, and it would make it a fourth-degree crime to retaliate against someone who files a complaint.

Prisoners can already file grievances electronically or on paper forms, but those forms were missing from two units during an unannounced inspection last month of the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility For Women in Hunterdon County.

Inspectors also said a telephone problem blocked some prisoners from calling their attorneys or outside investigators, according to new reports from the Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson, an independent watchdog. Many issues flagged were on the Restorative Housing Unit, the same area where several women said they were severely beaten by staff earlier this year.

Prison officials promised to address those and other problems, including an insufficient number of masks, according to the reports.

Those inspections happened the day after a tense public hearing where lawmakers appeared baffled that the office hadn’t visited the women’s prison more often. Corrections Ombudsman Dan DiBenedetti struggled to explain how he’d missed years of well-documented abuse, and his resignation was announced the same day his staff visited.

Other bills advanced Tuesday included two that would expand officer training (A5751 and A5749) and one (A4681) that would make more people eligible to go to halfway houses as they neared the end of their sentences.

The latter would help prisoners transition back to society and reduce the risk they commit more crimes, said Kevin McHugh, executive director of the Reentry Coalition of New Jersey, and Dan Lombardo, president of Volunteers of America Delaware Valley. Both testified in support along with Ron Pierce, a fellow with the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice.

Pierce spent decades behind bars before his release several years ago, and he said he wished he'd been able to take advantage of the services offered in halfway houses.

Lawmakers also amended another proposal (A4785) to demand prison officials do more to help prepare people for release. That would include forcing the corrections department to tell organizations that help prisoners find jobs and housing who's coming out, in the aftermath of a mass prison release last year when many nonprofits said they were blocked from knowing the names of new releases, which hampered their ability to prepare.

While several residents signaled their support for many of the bills, only one person signed up to raise concerns — and he ultimately withdrew his objections.

John Donnadio, executive director of the New Jersey Association of Counties, said he was initially worried there wasn't enough money to pay for some of the proposals. But an updated version of one bill included new funding for a "county reentry coordinator" and other changes, he said.

The body camera bill (A5039) would cost about \$26 million, a prison spokeswoman previously said.