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N.J. Assembly votes to equip all prison officers with body cameras after criminal charges at women's facility

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The New Jersey Assembly voted overwhelmingly Thursday to equip every prison officer with a body camera and increase penalties for retaliating against prisoners who report abuse.

Five bills breezed through the chamber with no debate and only a handful of “no” votes, months after women said they were severely beaten by staff at the state’s only women’s facility. Ten officers have been charged so far.

The Edna Mahan Correctional Facility For Women was already under heightened scrutiny since the U.S. Department of Justice concluded sexual abuse was rampant behind bars, and lawmakers have held hearings to demand more oversight.

The proposals need to be approved by the state Senate before they can head to the governor’s desk. The Senate is next scheduled to meet June 3, but it was not immediately clear if the prison reforms will be considered.

Three bills passed the Assembly 75-0.

Two would expand officer training (A5751 and A5749).

A third (A5750) would make it a fourth-degree crime to retaliate against anyone who filed a complaint, or for failing to report suspected abuse.

Another proposal (A4681) would make more people eligible to go to halfway houses. It earned slightly less support, passing 63-11 with one abstention.

The body camera bill (A5039) was approved 67-4, with three abstaining.

Some body cameras have already been deployed at the women’s prison, although officials have said they’re still months away from equipping everybody.

Body cameras generally receive broad support from both law enforcement leaders and advocates for reform.

Buying cameras for every prison would cost about \$26 million over the next five years, according to legislative records. That breaks down to \$8.6 million to buy equipment the first year and around \$4.4 million each year after to maintain the licenses to use them.

A sixth bill approved by committee earlier this week did not advance.

Prison officials would have to do more to help prepare people for release under that proposal (A4785), such as telling organizations that help prisoners find jobs and housing the names of who's coming out.