

The Star-Ledger

N.J. is paying a consultant \$1.2M to fix N.J.'s women's prison. Will it help?

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NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published May 31, 2021

The women were in danger.

Prison officers were accused of sexually abusing people behind bars, and prisoners said they suffered retaliation for speaking out. Many state officials appeared unable or unwilling to help. A lawsuit loomed.

So in March 1992, the Georgia Department of Corrections asked Anadora “Andie” Moss to investigate, according to a Human Rights Watch report published a few years later.

Moss’ investigation substantiated many of the claims, although the report said it proved difficult to actually prosecute officers. But the experience informed Moss’ decision to later found The Moss Group, a Washington, D.C.-based consulting firm that recently signed a \$1.2 million contract to address similar problems in New Jersey.

Critics have raised concerns about the price tag, and whether outside advisors are the best call when the federal government is already likely to monitor the state’s only women’s facility.

Yet people in other states who’ve worked with Moss or on similar issues spoke highly of the organization’s expertise, especially when addressing the seemingly intractable problem of sexual abuse behind bars.

“The best thing New Jersey can do is keep us there,” Moss said during a brief phone conversation. “While the amount may sound like a lot to taxpayers, they get many more resources than what’s in our contract.”

New Jersey announced its partnership in February, just weeks after several women said they were severely beaten by staff at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Hunterdon County, triggering a growing criminal probe that has led to charges against 10 officers.

Negotiations began months earlier. The state’s first contract with Moss was in November, when the group helped New Jersey finalize reforms with the U.S. Department of Justice after investigators found evidence of rampant sexual abuse, according to state records and a prison spokeswoman. (The head of the prison system has said the alleged beatings in January delayed the federal agreement, which has yet to be released.)

A new contract was signed in March, according to a retention agreement obtained through a public records request.

Over the next two years, The Moss Group has promised to help the state on several fronts, including improving training for sexual assault investigations.

During a recent budget hearing, some lawmakers asked Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks why he needed outsiders for tasks like “staffing analysis.”

“I didn’t read you anything that you’re not capable of handling,” said Assemblyman John Burzichelli, D-Gloucester, after ticking off the contract’s to-do list. “We would expect your group to be doing that anyway.”

Hicks has said the partnership was an example of “thinking outside the box” and showed the state’s commitment to reversing years of well-documented abuse.

“It was my idea, partly, to reach out to them, because of the work that they have done in other jurisdictions, because of their reputation,” Hicks told lawmakers.

Moss has worked all over the country.

Several years ago in Alabama, the Equal Justice Initiative exposed serious issues in the Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women, including prisoners who were raped and impregnated by officers.

The Moss Group helped Alabama officials better investigate abuse allegations and gave them concrete steps for improving conditions, said Charlotte Morrison, one of the nonprofit’s lawyers.

Moss has a “very strong reputation for doing cultural reform around sexual violence,” Morrison said.

The initial contract was worth nearly half a million dollars, AL.com reported, and a spokeswoman said Alabama’s corrections department was so happy they extended the agreement to include men’s prisons.

A contract with Moss is ultimately cheaper than settling lawsuits that pile up from sustained abuse, said Terri McDonald, a former top prison official for California who worked with Moss to reform Los Angeles jails.

Prisoners and officers may also be more likely to share openly with outsiders, said current and former corrections leaders.

“Their expertise around these issues just streamlines and often speeds up the fix,” said Pennsylvania Secretary of Corrections John Wetzel, who added that it still took about six years for him to significantly improve the culture at several facilities.

A list of proposed reforms is not a silver bullet.

More than a decade ago, Moss helped write dozens of recommendations for the Topeka Correctional Facility in Kansas, including generally banning male officers from patting women down to mounting more cameras.

Yet a few years later, the U.S. Department of Justice concluded that the facility failed to stop “sexual relations between staff and prisoners” as well as “open and notorious sex parties.”

Part of the problem was Kansas officials hadn’t listened to Moss, investigators wrote.

“Unfortunately, many of the recommendations outlined ... remain outstanding and unaddressed, and women prisoners continue to be subjected to harm,” the report said.

Lawyers who’ve represented prisoners have questioned whether the firm is mainly hired to make corrections officials feel better about themselves.

“They proposed training and changes that were wholly ineffective,” Deborah LaBelle, an attorney in Michigan, said about the organization.

In 2009, hundreds of women in the Great Lakes State were awarded \$100 million to settle accusations of harassment and assault by male officers. “The abuse continued during the time they were here and after the time they left,” LaBelle said.

Patricia Caruso, who directed Michigan’s corrections department when the settlement was reached, pushed back against that assessment.

“There are times you need outside eyes,” said Caruso, who also worked on a project with Moss’s firm after leaving Michigan’s department.

It helped that Moss and others around her had actually worked in prisons, Caruso said. “You don’t just have academics or paper pushers, you have people that understand how difficult these systems are to run.”

One of the group’s strengths was that they didn’t waltz in with a pre-established plan, said Gary Maynard, who’s run prisons around the country. They instead listen to the people living and working in the facilities before proposing solutions.

Maynard said he once hired Moss to reform a jail in New Orleans. Despite a move to a different building, Maynard said some officers still didn’t see incarcerated people as fully human because the “old culture had been transferred to the new facility” — a potential warning to New Jersey lawmakers who’ve voted to similarly move women elsewhere.

The problems can be deep-seeded.

In Georgia, where Moss worked years ago, a culture of retaliation has persisted, said Page Dukes, who was incarcerated in multiple facilities from 2007 through 2017. Soon

after she left, an officer was sentenced to years behind bars for sexually assaulting three women, and a lack of trust in the grievance process makes it difficult to flag additional problems, said Dukes, who now works for the Southern Center for Human Rights.

To try and reverse those issues, Moss relies on a broad network.

The firm's website reports a core staff of a dozen women who previously worked in a variety of industries, from corrections to real estate, and the organization also calls on 70 independent contractors, including former prison leaders, according to Moss and officials in other states.

Since starting in New Jersey, Moss has been in contact with local advocates like Bonnie Kerness, with the American Friends Service Committee, and Jean Ross, an attorney with the People's Organization For Progress.

She joined concerned lawmakers to tour the facility in April, according to two people present.

In May, Moss and an architect were scheduled to visit Edna Mahan again to evaluate whether the prison needed to be shuttered entirely, the commissioner told lawmakers. (Moss declined to offer her thoughts on New Jersey's situation so far, citing the need for confidentiality.)

The firm also heard from the state's largest corrections union at a meeting about a month ago, according to William Sullivan, president of NJ PBA Local 105. Longer shifts for staff were discussed, as well as only allowing female officers to work certain jobs — but bumping 8-hour shifts to 12 would violate officer contracts and limiting who can work where risked putting too much pressure on current staff, Sullivan said.

"You're just gonna have massive amounts of overtime and burnout," he said.

To make matters more difficult, it's not always clear why abuse is prevalent, said Julie Abbate, who helped launch the federal investigation into New Jersey when she was with the U.S. Department of Justice.

"Every facility, every system has different cultures," Abbate said.

Tolstoy might say each unsafe prison is unsafe in its own way.

For example, if prisons don't offer free tampons, predators can demand sex as currency from low-income women, Abbate said. An overly friendly environment might allow lines to be crossed. Or if isolation is used as punishment, officers can coerce women into sex by threatening to cut off contact with children.

Having somebody like Moss dig into what specifically is going wrong is key, said Abbate, who now works for the nonprofit Just Detention International.

“Staff sexual abuse in women’s prisons absolutely, absolutely without question can be eliminated,” she said.

NJ Advance Media staff writer Joe Atmonavage and The Associated Press contributed to this report.