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Top N.J. prison official quits after widespread abuse exposed

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New Jersey Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks has resigned following a damning report that revealed how his department repeatedly failed to stop abuse at the state's only women's prison.

Hicks submitted his resignation Tuesday morning and will leave June 18.

His departure comes a day after the release of a 73-page investigation into the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Hunterdon County by former state comptroller Matthew Boxer, which concluded officials were slow to enact reforms, didn't follow their own policies and that officers used excessive force and filed false reports after a series of violent cell extractions in January.

The report led Gov. Phil Murphy to announce he intends to close the prison.

"It has been an honor and a privilege to have served the Murphy Administration and the people of New Jersey as commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Corrections for the past three years," Hicks said in a statement. "I'm proud of the work we've done and wish our staff and individuals under our care well as the department continues its mission to ensure safety and promote rehabilitation."

Murphy stuck by Hicks while waiting for the independent review to be finished. When he was asked Monday about Hicks after the report was released, the governor said: "No news to make on leadership, but I'm very disturbed by the report. I'll just leave it at that."

Lawmakers from both political parties have been calling for Hicks to be fired for months as evidence mounted of a wide range of abuse and charges were filed against 10 corrections officers concerning the January extractions. His administration also failed to stop dozens of deaths statewide during the height of the pandemic, giving New Jersey the highest coronavirus death rate in the nation.

The state Senate previously voted overwhelmingly for Hicks' ouster and articles of impeachment had been filed in the Assembly.

"Yesterday's report was a truly disturbing look into the many failings of a system that allowed the women in its care to be assaulted and degraded by guards," Democratic Assemblywomen Gabriela Mosquera, Lisa Swain and Angela McKnight said in a joint statement. "The Commissioner's resignation is necessary to usher in new leadership that can help prevent these kinds of human rights violations from ever taking place again."

State Sen. Mike Testa, R-Cumberland, first called for the commissioner to step down more than a year ago.

“Hicks’ departure will not solve the systemic problems within the Department of Corrections, but it is a necessary first step,” Testa said in a statement.

When he was being confirmed as commissioner early last year, Hicks told lawmakers his “number one priority” would be fixing the problems at Edna Mahan.

But Monday’s report found — among other things — Hicks wasn’t even clear on who ran the facility in the months leading up to the alleged attacks.

He thought Erica Stem had taken over as the top official in November. She hadn’t, the report said. Personnel records showed that Stem had been transferred to the facility but only as an associate administrator, not the acting administrator, investigators wrote.

The commissioner also believed another associate administrator, Sean St. Paul, reported to Stem. He didn’t, the report said.

The report also found that while Hicks told the governor that the extractions on Jan. 11 and Jan. 12 “had not been authorized by anyone in NJDOC except the Associate Administrator,” someone from Hicks’ staff had been in contact with a facility representative before women were pulled out of their cells.

Murphy commissioned the independent review later that month, after NJ Advance Media reported that dozens of staff had been suspended after prisoners said they were beaten.

Hicks joined the department in 2007 and worked his way up the ranks. Just before he was nominated to lead the agency, Hicks served as chief of staff to Gary Lanigan, the commissioner appointed by Gov. Chris Christie in 2010 and initially retained by Murphy.

Lanigan retired amid another inquiry into sexual abuse allegations at the same facility.

Hicks had the backing of the largest corrections union and was described by colleagues as calm and cool-headed — and someone who was never in the public spotlight before ascending to a job he ultimately couldn’t salvage.

In an interview with NJ Advance Media in March, Hicks defended himself, touting his experience and the “holistic approach” he’s taken to implementing change for both prisoners and officers.

“You’ve got the department moving one way and individuals who are not complying with the rules moving another way, and we have to take action,” Hicks said at the time. “These are the ways you change a culture, and that doesn’t happen overnight. It’s possible. It can be done.”

The president of PBA Local 105 has said new wellness programs championed by the commissioner helped reduce officer suicides.

William Sullivan said the union has defended the commissioner to the governor's office, and legislative sources have previously said Murphy might have been hesitant to fire the commissioner because of the union's support.

Hicks has also worked to expand security and body worn cameras at multiple prisons and implement an early warning system to flag problem officers. He recently hired a new assistant commissioner of women's services to improve conditions at Edna Mahan.

His salary was about \$174,100 as of March, according to online pension records.

Victoria Kuhn, Hicks' chief of staff, will serve as acting commissioner, the department announced.

NJ Advance Media staff writers Sophie Nieto-Munoz and Brent Johnson contributed to this report.