

# The Star-Ledger

**Report suggests reforms for fixing Edna Mahan, N.J.'s women's prison. Here's why some could be tricky.**

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A damning new report about New Jersey's only women's prison offers a rare glimpse at the potential reforms under consideration to reverse years of well-documented abuse.

State officials are already negotiating changes with the federal government and an outside consultant, but both have so far declined to publicize their recommendations about the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Hunterdon County.

In contrast, the 73-page investigation released Monday has already led Gov. Phil Murphy to announce plans to shutter the facility (which was one of the suggestions) and the head of the prison system to resign (which wasn't).

Closing the facility and relocating prisoners will take years. Here are other recommendations from former state comptroller Matthew Boxer and his team at Lowenstein Sandler LLP on improvements that can be made now.

## ***Cell extractions need outside monitors***

The report was prompted by allegations that staff severely beat women while pulling them from cells earlier this year.

Those extractions should have been watched by either investigators who work for the prison system, or representatives from the corrections ombudsperson's office, an independent watchdog, the report said.

The department's Special Investigations Division will film extractions going forward, according to the report.

## ***Those prison investigators need more independence***

Although the Special Investigations Division should monitor future extractions, many prisoners and advocates have long questioned their neutrality.

"Currently, all SID investigators are themselves former correctional officers, potentially having attended training at the Academy or even worked alongside the officers whose conduct they now investigate," the report said. "That may impact the impartiality, or at least the appearance of impartiality, of those investigators."

The department should consider hiring State Police or other outsiders with law enforcement backgrounds, the report said, especially since the division leader's upcoming retirement offers a "fresh start."

### ***The prison watchdog should be more aggressive***

The report confirmed what has long been suspected: New Jersey's prison ombudsman has not taken advantage of new authority to investigate abuse.

While the office "has subpoena power, it has not yet been exercised, and unscheduled correctional facility inspections began only recently," meaning the office mainly "receives complaints and then simply refers them to another party," the report said.

The agency's current leader will step down soon and the governor is looking for a replacement. The new hire should be "more aggressive and proactive" looking at the women's prison, investigators wrote.

### ***The rules for pulling prisoners from their cells should be written down***

Investigators said they got conflicting answers about who approved cell extractions.

The commissioner had recently told facility administrators to ask permission for late night extractions, but that order was never put in writing and "its parameters are not entirely clear," the report said.

### ***More women officers are needed***

One hundred and sixty-six female officers worked at the facility as of March, a little less than half of the total, the report said. Officials should aim for 70%, investigators wrote.

The Moss Group, the outside consultants recently hired to help fix the prison, has also suggested only allowing female officers to work many jobs, although officials have repeatedly said it's difficult to hire and retain women, especially for a facility that isn't near a big city.

### ***Officers should be paid more***

A starting salary of less than \$44,500 is likely not enough, the report said, especially since some county jails pay more.

However, lawmakers have often raised concerns about the corrections department's budget, which has remained around \$1 billion a year despite a falling prison population.

The report also said the state should consider relaxing requirements that certain staff carry firearms, and potentially allow people from other states to apply, since Pennsylvania is only a few miles from the prison.

### ***Beef up training***

Officers should receive more hands-on guidance on a host of issues, including how to de-escalate volatile situations, the report said.

Several bills before the state Legislature would also increase training.

### ***Finish installing new security and body cameras***

The department aims to have 634 security cameras at the facility by September, according to the report. About 250 upgraded cameras had been installed by the end of April.

One hundred and twenty body-worn cameras are also now in use, out of about 200 total. The commissioner previously estimated they'd finish that rollout by fall.

### ***Consider housing prisoners in multiple locations***

It's difficult to separate women who don't get along when there's only one facility, the report said.

Having at least two smaller prisons in different parts of New Jersey could let women live near their families and potentially allow some officers to work closer to home.

New facilities aren't an automatic fix. When a jail in New Orleans once moved buildings, some officers still didn't treat incarcerated people in a humane way, according to Gary Maynard, a former jail official who's run prisons all over the country.

The "old culture had been transferred to the new facility," he said in an interview earlier this year.

### ***Improve the buildings***

It could take years to fully shutter Edna Mahan, meaning the century-old prison may still need upgrades.

The facility recently suffered a power outage, and the report said poor conditions can lower everyone's morale.

The "disrepair of the physical facility can signal to inmates ... that because the State does not 'care' enough to fix the facility, it does not care about the inmates or their behavior, good or bad," investigators wrote. "This also applies to staff members."

Furthermore, abandoned buildings "have been used by correctional officers as a place to engage in illegal sexual acts," the report said.

*Interview prisoners and officers*

“Inmates reported that no one is looking out for them and their rights are being abused,” the report said. “On the other hand, officers have reported that the inmates are effectively in control of the facility and that inmates do not respect their authority.”

Officials need to have extensive conversations with both parties to address that disconnect, investigators wrote.