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N.J. lawmakers vote for more oversight of state prisons after reports of widespread abuse

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The state Assembly overwhelmingly passed six more bills Monday to increase oversight of state prisons and bolster prisoners' rights in New Jersey, part of a wave of reforms advanced by lawmakers since several incarcerated women said they were beaten by officers earlier this year.

The proposals would require prisons to report when staff used physical force and allow some incarcerated women to raise their newborns at halfway houses, among other changes.

"If we want to encourage inmates to become productive and law-abiding members of society, we must give them the tools they need to succeed," Democratic Assemblywomen Gabriela Mosquera, Angela McKnight, Angelica Jimenez and Carol Murphy said in a joint statement about a bill to improve vocational training.

The bills still need approval from the state Senate before they can head to the governor's desk.

Nearly a dozen bills have now passed the Assembly in the wake of a growing criminal probe at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women in Hunterdon County. The alleged beatings have already led the corrections commissioner to resign and the governor to announce plans to close the prison.

The chamber previously voted to equip all prison officers with body cameras, a proposal recently approved by a state Senate committee.

Although none of Monday's bills were publicly debated, the most contentious was a proposal (A5756) that would restrict when officers can punish prisoners by extending their time behind bars.

When prisoners are eligible for parole is partially determined by their "commutation credits," which are automatically added to their records and can be taken away for breaking the rules.

The bill would bar those credits from being removed for "minor disciplinary infractions," such as being late for work or faking an illness. The proposal passed 48-22, with most Republicans opposed or not voting.

"Everyone makes mistakes," Democratic Assemblywomen and bill sponsors Shanique Speight, Yvonne Lopez, McKnight and Murphy said in a statement. "No prisoner

deserves to lose out on their chance to re-enter society at an earlier date due to minor, non-violent disciplinary issues.”

The state’s largest corrections union, PBA Local 105, has previously raised concerns that lawmakers are taking away valuable tools to discipline unruly prisoners.

A state report about abuse at the women’s prison said, “officers have reported that the inmates are effectively in control of the facility and that inmates do not respect their authority.”

At the same time, prisoners “reported that no one is looking out for them and their rights are being abused,” investigators wrote.

Other bills passed with broader support, including one to expand the authority of an independent watchdog.

A proposal (A5755) to let the corrections ombudsperson evaluate whether criminal investigations were “accurate, unbiased, and thorough” passed 71-0.

The agency currently only reviews whether prisoners are being treated humanely and can’t evaluate whether somebody was wrongly convicted.

The added responsibility could strain an office that has fewer staff today than several years ago and affect who’s hired to take over since the current ombudsman is stepping down.

Lawmakers have frequently complained that prison officials don’t share enough information, and several proposals would require more disclosure.

A bill (A5754) mandating an annual report summarizing when officers restrained prisoners and when prisoners attacked staff, among other information, passed 70-2.

“Knowing more about use of force and violence taking place in these facilities ... would help us develop better policies and initiatives going forward,” Democratic Assembly representatives and bill sponsors Gordon Johnson, William Spearman, Benjie Wimberly and Lopez said in a statement.

Another (A5865) requiring reports summarizing discipline imposed behind bars passed 70-2.

That bill would also allow certain women to move out of state prisons and into halfway houses to raise new babies. They could receive parenting classes and help from a doula for the birth.

A fifth proposal (A5753) telling prison officials to share more information about possible prison closures passed 68-4, and a sixth (A5752) to improve workforce training was approved 72-0.