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Should N.J. hire an outsider to run state prisons? The job is like ‘playing chess on a three-dimensional board.’

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For the second time in three years, the man in charge of New Jersey prisons has stepped down amid a growing scandal at the state’s only women’s facility.

The opening offers Gov. Phil Murphy an election-year challenge: Should New Jersey continue to promote from within or hire an outsider?

Even without allegations of abuse by staff, the job requires oversight of thousands of officers and about 12,000 prisoners in nearly a dozen facilities, some of which are more than a century old, while simultaneously negotiating with skeptical unions, nonprofits that help people reenter society and a growing advocacy community.

“I’ve likened it sometimes to playing chess on a three-dimensional board,” said Terri McDonald, a former top prison official for California who helped reform Los Angeles jails. “You’re running cities.”

In interviews, corrections leaders around the country, advocates for reform and formerly incarcerated women discussed a variety of models New Jersey could follow, from North Dakota to New York, at a time when criminal justice issues are near the top of the national agenda.

The choice of who to pick (or keep) is also crucial since the next confirmed commissioner will face challenges their predecessors didn’t, particularly at the women’s prison.

The Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Hunterdon County houses only a few hundred people, a fraction of the state’s total population, but its problems have drawn outsized attention.

Corrections Commissioner Gary Lanigan retired in 2018 amid an inquiry into sexual abuse allegations at the prison, only to be replaced by Chief of Staff Marcus Hicks, who submitted his letter of resignation this month after a state report partially faulted his administration for failing to prevent a series of beatings at the same facility.

The system is now overseen by Victoria Kuhn who, like her predecessor, had been the department’s chief of staff.

She first joined the state payroll in 1997 and has worked as a prosecutor and lawyer for the state attorney general’s office, according to the corrections department and online pension records.

Regardless of what the future holds, a spokesman said Kuhn “has the experience to steer to the ship” and noted that she’s worked on excessive force and sexual abuse issues as an attorney and has a background reviewing allegations of misconduct and discrimination at the department.

Kuhn’s committed to “ensuring the population’s voice is heard” and making sure prisoners leave “with skills and resources for successful reentry,” Chris Carden wrote in an email.

She will need the support of the governor and approval from the state Senate to keep the job.

That would not be a good move, said members of New Jersey Prison Justice Watch, a coalition of advocates and formerly incarcerated people who previously organized what may have been the first protest outside the women’s prison.

There “is considerable risk of perpetuating the culture of non-transparency and impunity if we look internally,” the group said in a statement.

A background in social work or psychology would be ideal, said Nafeesah Goldsmith, one of the coalition’s leaders who spent years in Edna Mahan. A history of helping people reenter society would also be a plus since it would show a willingness to listen to those directly affected by prison policy, she said.

“If all you are looking to do is control and confine, then that’s not helpful,” Goldsmith said.

Corrections leaders from other states said a lack of experience running prisons wasn’t a deal breaker.

In 2005, Leann Bertsch left a job running North Dakota’s labor department to take over state prisons without ever having worked in corrections.

“It was a high learning curve,” Bertsch, a former prosecutor, said in an interview. But “it forced me to really get in the weeds.”

She didn’t make any big moves her first 18 months, she said. But during what became a 15-year tenure under three governors, she aimed to remodel North Dakota after Norway’s more rehabilitative approach, and the state reported drops in solitary confinement and uses of force.

Looking back, it would’ve helped to more quickly replace staff who didn’t share her vision, said Bertsch, who now works for a private prison company.

Another approach can be found across the Hudson.

New York City just hired Vincent Schiraldi to run its jails, including the notorious Rikers complex.

Schiraldi has experience, as the former head of the city's probation department and director of Juvenile Corrections in Washington D.C. But many advocates see him as a reformer, partially because of his research with the Columbia School of Social Work.

"Prisons can be really harmful places, and I do worry that really gets normalized in the culture of corrections," said Bruce Western, who co-directed Columbia University's Justice Lab with Schiraldi. "Part of the potential of looking to a criminal justice reformer is you can reverse that."

The job calls for more than just good managerial skills, Western said. Commissioners need a deep understanding of how poverty, bad schools and a lack of mental health care can drive up prison populations, especially since people are often released into the same damaged communities they came from.

"They're deepening inequality rather than reducing it," Western said about prisons in general.

Just like it's taking years to close Rikers, New Jersey's plan to shutter the women's prison could take a long time.

Federal oversight remains likely and dealing with the U.S. Department of Justice can pose an entirely new set of challenges, even for people with corrections-heavy resumes.

Gary Maynard has run prisons in Maryland, Iowa, South Carolina and Oklahoma, but he said a more recent job helping reform a New Orleans jail under federal scrutiny nonetheless required new skills.

"Working with the city government, the courts, the monitors, those were things that were new to me," Maynard said. "Those were the most difficult to learn."

Corrections leaders said a good candidate needs a thick skin, the backbone to discipline top staff and open ears for people who know more than they do, especially since all commissioners must navigate powerful constituencies.

In New Jersey, lawmakers are increasingly antsy over soaring overtime costs and the Legislature has advanced bills to give themselves more power to oversee state prisons.

There's the Corrections Ombudsperson, an independent watchdog with new authority to investigate allegations of abuse.

On the front lines are more than 5,000 officers, who worked tough shifts even before the pandemic killed several. Dozens have also died by suicide in recent decades, according to the state's largest corrections union.

“A big thing would be officer wellness,” said William Sullivan, president of PBA Local 105, when asked what he wanted from a commissioner.

Hicks, who recently stepped down, had improved the food, offered resiliency training, created a mental health hotline and established an early warning system, all changes that should continue, Sullivan said.

And then there’s Murphy.

New Jersey’s constitution says the head of the prison system serves “at the pleasure of the Governor,” meaning the position is inextricably tied to whoever has the top job — and polls show Murphy favored to win re-election.

“What are we looking for?” Murphy said at a recent press conference. “It’s too early to tell but ... you should assume that this will be a very broad search to replace the commissioner.”

In any case, the next confirmed commissioner will benefit from a falling prison population and the expertise of an outside consultant and a new assistant commissioner of women’s services.

Yet perhaps unsurprisingly, navigating so many factions can create high turnover.

Nationwide, prison leaders often stay for only three years or less, according to the Correctional Leaders Association.

That’s a problem, said McDonald, in California.

“If you want systems to transform and reform, I think folks need to ask themselves what could they do to make it where people can sit in those jobs for a decade or two,” she said. “The folks making the decision have to ask themselves their ability to support ... that leadership role during the good times and the bad.”

The Associated Press contributed to this report.