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Lawsuit accuses nurse of filing false report after beatings in N.J.'s women's prison

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Tatianna Harrison held out her hands.

An officer in New Jersey's only women's prison tightened handcuffs around her wrists.

Then staff in riot gear stormed her room, dragged her into the hallway, pinned her to the floor and appeared to punch her, according to video of the incident and one of her attorneys.

On Friday, Harrison, 22, filed a lawsuit against the prison system, making her the fifth woman to go public about a series of violent cell extractions at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in January.

Her complaint accuses multiple employees of misconduct, including a nurse, over an incident that has already led the corrections commissioner to resign and the governor to announce plans to shutter the facility. Ten officers named in the lawsuit face criminal charges.

"The force used against Ms. Harrison is inexcusable," Adam Strychaluk, a lawyer at Kaufman Lieb Lebowitz & Frick LLP, said in a statement.

Representatives for the corrections department did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

NJ Advance Media previously interviewed Harrison's cellmate, Ajila Nelson, who alleges she was sexually assaulted.

Both women can be seen putting their hands through a cell door to be handcuffed, according to footage previously released by the state attorney general's office. Harrison was identified in the clip titled "Hand-held video 5" by one of her attorneys, Ali Frick.

After officers rushed in, somebody says, "Stop resisting."

"How am I resisting?" a woman's voice shouts back.

The lawsuit said officers "threw her to the ground, and proceeded to repeatedly punch, kick, and stomp on her head and body."

Staff knew that "Harrison had a serious pre-existing spinal injury" that once "paralyzed her from the waist down for eight months," so they "intentionally targeted her back while one officer knelt on her spine," the complaint said.

None of that is visible in the footage, since the camera sometimes only filmed officers' backs.

The poor videography may have been an attempt to mask excessive force, according to a state report.

Staff also "ripped Ms. Harrison's shirt open and pulled her pants and underwear down, exposing her groin and buttocks," the lawsuit said.

In the hallway, officers held her against the floor, according to the video. About 3 minutes and 40 seconds into the clip, an officer on his knees appears to swing an arm toward Harrison. About seven seconds later, another partially obscured officer can be seen jerking his body toward her.

Both moments were likely punches, according to Frick, the attorney. Harrison ultimately suffered a concussion and other injuries, according to the lawsuit.

Friday's complaint also accused a prison nurse, Sandra Lapekas, of complicity in the violence.

The lawsuit alleged that Lapekas failed to effectively assess Harrison after she was hurt. Lapekas then filed a report which noted "no new marks, bruises or injuries" on Harrison, according to a copy of a medical chart included in the complaint.

After Harrison was dragged from her cell, the video shows officers escorting her to a door marked "Medical," but the camera does not follow them inside.

The nurse's name is listed on several use-of-force reports that prosecutors said falsely described prisoners as uninjured, but those forms are filled out by officers, not nurses.

Lapekas' union pushed back against any suggestion that medical care was subpar.

"There are constraints to what we can say about the events of that night although, from available evidence, the nurse on duty that night assessed patients and provided needed medical treatment in a stressful and potentially violent environment," Debbie White, president of Health Professionals & Allied Employees, said in a statement.

Medical staff did flag injuries that night which led to a deeper investigation of the incident, White said.

Harrison's complaint was filed in New Jersey Superior Court of Hunterdon County and asked for an unstated amount of money and attorneys' fees.

The lawsuit also targets the man in charge of the facility at that time, Associate Administrator Sean St. Paul. He's previously been sued by at least three male prisoners.

Harrison was sentenced in 2018 to decades behind bars for murder and two weapons charges, according to online prison records.

NJ Advance Media staff writer S.P. Sullivan contributed to this report.