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Federal officials advised N.J. about issues in the women's prison, but details were never released

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Years before abuse in New Jersey's women's prison became a statewide scandal, local prison leaders asked the federal government for help.

But state and federal officials have not said what advice was given about the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Hunterdon County.

The prison system is also not releasing details about one reform that is public: The ongoing deployment of body cameras for prison officers.

In 2017, New Jersey brought in a team of outside consultants from the National Institute of Corrections, according to a state report.

The institute is part of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and exists to help reform prisons and jails nationwide.

Those experts made several recommendations for the women's facility, including that staff should receive "gender-responsive training," the report said. Two years later, prison leaders and supervisors did attend three days of training.

NJ Advance Media filed records requests for the list of recommendations with the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the New Jersey Department of Corrections.

An attorney for the federal bureau rejected the request on the grounds that the records belonged to New Jersey.

A New Jersey records custodian also issued a denial, saying state statute and case law allowed them to withhold "advisory, contemplative or deliberative material."

What is known is that, three years after the consultants arrived, the U.S. Department of Justice concluded sexual abuse by staff was an "open secret."

In the wake of that scathing review, New Jersey announced all Edna Mahan officers would be outfitted with body cameras.

NJ Advance Media also filed a records request for the policy governing when those cameras must be turned on and off.

Those rules must navigate serious security and privacy concerns. Footage of a facility's interior could be used to plan an escape, while an officer patrolling a bathroom or shower could capture compromising images.

Similar issues are addressed in the rules governing how police departments use body cameras, which the state attorney general's office made available to the public.

"For safety and security the (department) does not share their Internal Management Procedures," spokeswoman Liz Velez wrote in an email. "The Department is reviewing and will revise its policies where appropriate to ensure alignment with the guidance provided by the AG directive."

A records custodian similarly cited several local laws, including a statute allowing officials to withhold information about "surveillance techniques which, if disclosed, would create a risk to the safety of persons" and "property."

Former Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks previously said all officers at the women's prison should have body cameras by this fall.

New Jersey is not the first state to be investigated by the federal government after bringing in consultants.

More than a decade ago, the National Institute of Corrections wrote dozens of recommendations for the Topeka Correctional Facility in Kansas.

Their final 24-page report suggested mounting more cameras and generally banning male officers from patting down women.

Yet a few years later, federal investigators still concluded that Kansas failed to stop "sexual relations between staff and prisoners" as well as "open and notorious sex parties."

"Unfortunately, many of the recommendations outlined ... remain outstanding and unaddressed, and women prisoners continue to be subjected to harm," investigators wrote.

The Garden State has since hired another consultant, Washington, D.C.-based The Moss Group, and federal oversight of the women's prison remains likely.

The governor has also announced plans to shutter the facility and Hicks has resigned, the second commissioner in three years to step down amid growing problems at Edna Mahan.