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N.J. women prisoners are still in danger, feds say. Officials just announced new reforms.

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New Jersey prison leaders have reached an agreement with the federal government on how to reform the state's only women's facility, years after evidence first appeared that sexual abuse and exploitation of prisoners was rampant behind bars.

Even as the U.S. Department of Justice announced on Tuesday a series of changes for the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility, the agency also alleged the state still fails to protect incarcerated women from sexual abuse by staff.

New Jersey has known about problems at Edna Mahan "for a substantial period of time," yet prison leaders "have been deliberately indifferent to prisoner health and safety by failing to adequately address the conditions described," the justice department wrote in a complaint filed in U.S. District Court.

"All prisoners, whether male or female, deserve to be safe," Kristen Clarke, the assistant attorney general for the justice department's civil rights division, said Tuesday. "Edna Mahan staff have failed to implement reasonable reforms."

Filing the complaint was the first step before the two sides can formally ask a court to approve the agreement, known as a consent decree.

If a judge accepts it, the agreement would mark another chapter in the ugly history of Edna Mahan, a sprawling and aging prison named after a pioneering female superintendent and located in Hunterdon County. Lawsuits by prisoners alleging rape and sexual harassment spurred a series of reports from NJ Advance Media, which prompted state legislative hearings and reform bills across two administrations.

The proposed reforms will still apply even if the state follows through on plans to eventually shutter the prison.

A spokeswoman for Gov. Phil Murphy said he "believes that today's consent decree between the Department of Justice and New Jersey Department of Corrections is a critical step forward in breaking the cycle of misconduct to better serve the needs of incarcerated women."

"Governor Murphy remains committed to working with his partners in the Legislature to responsibly close the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility," Alexandra Altman wrote in an email.

Prison officials said they have made “significant strides” in improving conditions, including equipping officers with body cameras and hiring outside consultants from The Moss Group.

“The agreement marks a significant step in our journey to transform the culture of Edna Mahan with a tangible plan,” acting Corrections Commissioner Victoria Kuhn said in a statement. “We look at this measure as an opportunity to close the book on the sordid history of the facility and pen a new way forward.”

Federal officials said under the proposed consent decree New Jersey will increase supervision at Edna Mahan, make it easier and safer for prisoners to report abuse, hold staff more accountable, improve transparency and appoint an independent monitor to oversee the reforms.

“The goal of this agreement is to ensure that this horrific conduct never happens again,” said Rachael Honig, the Acting U.S. Attorney of New Jersey. “And that means while the investigation has reached its conclusion, the work has not.”

Once a federal judge finalizes the agreement, state leaders must begin developing and implementing new ways to protect prisoners.

Within a year, policies concerning a number of topics — including sexual abuse, retaliation, surveillance cameras and the process for reporting allegations — must be drafted by the state and reviewed by the federal government, according to the agreement.

Once they’re approved by the justice department, New Jersey must re-train staff.

The agreement also mandates public meetings with former Edna Mahan prisoners, prisoner advocates and family members of women currently inside.

Tuesday’s announcement was met with a mix of optimism and skepticism from former prisoners.

“I guess I’m glad they’re talking about this, but they’ve been talking about this since I came into the institution in 1991,” said Therese Afdahl, who served 30 years and was one of several women who came forward in lawsuits a decade ago alleging physical and sexual abuse.

“Do I have faith in any of these government systems calling for reforms? No,” she said when reached by phone Tuesday. “It has to be a truly outside source enforcing them.”

Jane Parnell, a former corrections administrator in Washington and a consultant for The Moss Group, is set to be appointed as the independent monitor.

The state will pay her \$250,000 a year, according to the agreement, as she conducts compliance reviews and produces performance reports.

Parnell will oversee the prison's progress for at least three years, according to the consent decree.

A federal judge will have jurisdiction to enforce any part of the agreement. The federal government can take a harder line if New Jersey fails to improve.

Investigators opened a federal civil rights probe several years ago and released a report last year that found the sexual abuse and exploitation of women by Edna Mahan staff was an "open secret."

Federal authorities found officers coerced prisoners into sexual acts, groped them during strip searches and "routinely" demeaned them as "bitches," "dykes" and other slurs.

The justice department alleges in its recent complaint that New Jersey has "not taken action sufficient to correct" the inadequate systems in place for preventing, detecting and responding to sexual abuse.

Prison "policies and practices deter prisoners from reporting staff sexual abuse due to the threat of retaliation, and Defendants fail to protect victims who report sexual abuse from retaliation," Tuesday's complaint says.

The proposed agreement addresses a long list of issues that festered for years, officials said.

"The Justice Department believes full implementation of the reforms in the proposed consent decree will ensure that women at Edna Mahan will receive one of the basic protections they are entitled to under the Constitution — to be reasonably safe from staff sexual abuse," Clarke, the justice department official, said.

Problems have mounted at the facility even after the agency first raised red flags.

In January, corrections officers violently pulled multiple women from their cells, leading to criminal charges against 10 employees.

One woman alleged she was sexually assaulted during the extractions.

Federal investigators said the state has violated the Eighth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution prohibiting cruel and unusual punishment, and the federal Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act.

The head of the state's largest corrections union, PBA Local 105 President William Sullivan, said he had not yet read the complaint or the agreement.

The last two prison commissioners have stepped down amid scandals at the facility.