

The Star-Ledger

Female prisoners in N.J. will get more health care services behind bars and after release

By Blake Nelson

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published Nov. 28, 2021

New Jersey is rolling out a new program to connect women released from prison with health care services, part of a range of reforms underway since federal oversight of the state's only women's facility began last summer.

At no extra cost to taxpayers, a team of doctors will soon begin meeting with women at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Hunterdon County to develop individual care plans and connect them with clinics, therapists and other specialists upon release.

The expansion is one of the first changes overseen by acting Corrections Commissioner Victoria Kuhn, who took over in June.

"Women in the state's custody face a myriad of health issues," Kuhn said in a statement. "Navigating these services can be daunting, and we want to ensure they do not feel alone and have the full support of the Department in their reintegration process."

Kuhn signed a Memorandum of Understanding last month with the New Jersey Reentry Corporation, a Kearny-based nonprofit now preparing a team of nearly a dozen people to help women navigate the health care system.

The agreement lasts until June 30.

Research has shown that incarcerated women often face more health problems than the general population, as well as higher risks of trauma, substance abuse and domestic abuse.

"If you would do just a basic screening you may not get that comprehensive profile that you would want," said Gloria Bachmann, associate dean of women's health at the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and the corporations' medical director.

"Health also is being less anxious as to, 'when can I buy my next breakfast, lunch or dinner?'" she said in an interview.

Anyone within six months of release is eligible, including those who will stay on parole, according to the agreement. About 70 women will likely be released in the coming months, according to a recent department tally.

Obioma Onwusi, the nonprofit's Health Navigator, will oversee the program to connect released women to behavioral health, sexual assault, addiction, mental health and gynecology experts, among others.

The support will continue after women finish their sentences, officials said.

The state has been under pressure from lawmakers and advocates to improve conditions, and women formerly incarcerated at Edna Mahan have long said health care behind bars is poor.

A federal judge assumed oversight of the women's prison in August after years of well-documented sexual abuse and criminal charges against multiple staff.

All officers at Edna Mahan now have body cameras and upgrades to the surveillance system is about 95% done, spokeswoman Liz Velez wrote in an email. The facility has also beefed up the number of patrolling officers, supervisors and investigators, she said.

Furthermore, staff will be required to take new training called "Inclusion and Understanding: Promoting Safety within our Facilities," focused on the needs of transgender prisoners.

Several transgender women have raised concerns in recent years about their treatment.