

Murphy must confront allegations of brutality, abuse at women's prison | Opinion

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By [Express-Times guest columnist](#)

By **Carl Golden**

With the revelations that the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women in Clinton has been operating on a level associated with medieval dungeons — assaults, beatings and sexual predatory behavior — Gov. Phil Murphy has been thrown on the defensive and into an untenable position.

Again.

The administration's history in dealing with instances of personnel misconduct is one of paralysis and stonewalling while hoping that a cursory examination will suffice to quell the uproar and allow the issue to fade.

This time, however, unlike the rape accusation brought against a senior official and the patronage hiring binge of unqualified individuals at the Schools Development Authority, the administration confronts a unified cry of outrage over the disclosure that inmates at the facility were routinely subjected to unspeakable acts of violence by correctional officers.

Some 30 officers at the facility have been placed on administrative leave as a result of the accusations, but the controversy has grown.

In an extraordinary move, 25 Democratic state senators called on the governor to demand the resignation of Department of Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks, the operation of the facility turned over to federal authorities and the immediate transfer of the 395 inmates housed there.

In a letter to the governor, the senators charged that Hicks was clearly not up to the task of administering the Department of Corrections and that “violations of the law and of basic human rights have been allowed to continue under Hicks’ leadership and must end now.”

The accusatory language and the unequivocal demand for Hicks’ resignation is a rare public expression of outrage accompanied by an implied threat of political consequences.

It cannot be dismissed as an attempt to secure partisan advantage and it is not rhetoric that can easily be walked back.

Gubernatorial and bureaucratic expressions of outrage and horror over what appears to be systemic brutality at the facility are no longer sufficient, the Democratic senators said, and swift action by the administration — including dismissal of a cabinet officer — is necessary.

The governor has uttered all the proper phrases, pledging an immediate investigation, promising that anyone who engaged in improper behavior will be held accountable and appointed former State Comptroller Matthew Boxer to lead a probe into the allegations.

For whatever reason — loyalty, fear of political backlash, aversion to admit committing a mistake, concern over a rush to judgment, fear of public embarrassment, or struggling to escape blame — the administration has been slow to react to incidents of misbehavior.

The reluctance to move with alacrity has raised questions about the administration’s political insights and instincts, often allowing issues to fester and turn into public relations nightmares. The repeated failures to quickly get ahead of the curve, control the dialogue, and determine the outcome comes at a cost.

The allegations of sexual assault against a senior official and the almost comical scramble to avoid responsibility for hiring him dragged on for month after embarrassing month. As did the disclosures that the director of the Schools Development Authority doled out high paid positions to friends and relatives, many of whom lacked basic qualifications.

These instances portrayed a politically inept administration wracked by indecision, unable to recognize the damage inflicted or understand what steps to take to overcome it.

Conversations with cabinet officers or senior staff about the need to resign or be dismissed are among the most difficult any governor confronts. They are also among the most necessary.

While there exists a natural human inclination to shy away from such face-to-face interactions, any concerns for personal feelings and emotions must be put aside in favor of the larger interest of preserving the credibility and integrity of elected leadership.

The horror stories coming from the Edna Mahan facility will not disappear with the passage of time. Indeed, there may be additional and more dreadful tales waiting to be told.

The damage done already is significant and must be dealt with — a reality recognized by the letter from the senators to the governor.

The missive is, in effect, a plea for the administration to avoid repeating its errors in previous similar situations and move decisively toward a dramatic change in departmental leadership.

The governor may be reluctant to do so — a somewhat understandable reaction when it involves someone he personally selected — but there comes a time when the political head must rule the humanitarian heart.

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