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# Calls Grow In California To Protect Inmates At Women's Lockups From Sexual Abuse

By EDITOR • DEC 4, 2019

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MARY LOUISE KELLY, HOST:

To California now and efforts to protect female inmates from sexual abuse. A new state transparency law means that disciplinary records of officers fired for sexual misconduct are now being released. That is happening as former inmates work with state legislators to increase oversight of corrections officers. Julie Small with member station KQED of San Francisco reports. And a warning to our listeners - this story contains graphic descriptions of sexual assault.

JULIE SMALL, BYLINE: One officer groped and fondled the buttocks of a mentally ill inmate while putting her in restraints. Another officer had intercourse with an inmate without her consent multiple times before he got caught. The abuse was described in internal affairs documents obtained by KQED. The records and court documents show California prison officials fired at least six officers for sexual misconduct between 2014 and 2018. Some were criminally prosecuted. Amika Mota was an inmate at the Central California Women's Facility in Chowchilla during that time. She says she put up with unwanted sexual attention from three guards, including the one who ran her dorm.

AMIKA MOTA: I had to wear a tight tank top. He liked having his housing unit full of things he liked to look at - was what he said.

SMALL: Mota says that officer became increasingly possessive and ordered her to write sexually explicit letters to him. She says other guards expected to see her changing out of her clothes during walkthroughs.

MOTA: It's not a bone in my body that ever, like, felt attracted to any of these officers or felt like any of the words that we spoke were true. It was just this survival technique - right? - to play along.

SMALL: Mota was released in 2015 after serving a nine-year sentence for vehicular manslaughter. She says she never filed a complaint while in prison, fearing retaliation. Dismissals for sexual misconduct are extremely rare among the 26,000 officers who work in California state prisons. But advocates for inmates believe the problem is much greater than the statistics show. In 2016, a team of lawyers who monitor conditions for inmates as part of a class action lawsuit interviewed over a hundred women at the Central Valley Prison. Attorney Corene Kendrick says many reported officers physically and sexually abused them and threatened them if they told.

CORENE KENDRICK: It was kind of a constant stream of verbal sexual harassment or misogynist statements and really disgusting behavior, catcalling at its highest level.

SMALL: A spokeswoman for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation wrote in an email that all sexual violence, staff sexual misconduct and sexual harassment is strictly prohibited, and all allegations are investigated. She also noted that inmates are given confidential phone numbers to agencies that investigate allegations of misconduct. Inspector General Roy Wesley's office monitors and reports on those investigations.

ROY WESLEY: Our power is to write about it and to bring the transparency to the public because otherwise, nobody knows what happens in these things.

SMALL: But Amika Mota says that transparency has little effect in a system where prison wardens decide what's investigated and who's disciplined.

MOTA: It's not the rules or the regulations or the - it's the culture. And, like, how do you deeply affect this culture that's existed for so long where these things are just normal and OK?

SMALL: Mota is working with state lawmakers to increase oversight of correctional officers and provide more protection for inmates who report sexual abuse. They plan to hold a public hearing at the women's prison in the Central Valley in February.

For NPR News, I'm Julie Small in San Francisco.

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