

Justice investigates sexual abuse at Tutwiler

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The U.S. Justice Department has opened an investigation of the Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women in Wetumpka, less than a year after a report of allegations of sexual abuse and misconduct against inmates was released.

Bryan Stevenson, executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), the Montgomery-based nonprofit legal firm that released last year's report, said the Civil Rights Division of the department was at Tutwiler for four days last week.

"It could take multiple visits. It will just depend on how they want to proceed," Stevenson said. "The first step in any investigation is to talk to people and find out who else they should talk to, and then begin to assess what kinds of complaints to file."

The EJI report found that Alabama Department of Corrections employees had illegal sexual contact with dozens of women at the Wetumpka facility. The group also said official responses to reports of abuse created an atmosphere of intimidation that discouraged future complaints.

In this investigation, the Justice Department will determine if there were civil rights violations, criminal violations or unconstitutional conduct occurring at the prison, Stevenson said.

Legal action by inmates has been taken against both the state and correctional officers. But Stevenson said the Justice Department will have more leverage to process complaints against the state.

The U.S. Justice Department's National Institute of Corrections (NIC) spent three days at Tutwiler last fall for a report requested by Alabama Prison Commissioner Kim Thomas.

The report found a multitude of problems at the prison, including a failure to report sexual abuse of inmates. The report also said the facility had a culture of "intimidation and undue harshness."

Since December, after the report was released, Thomas began implementing new policies to take corrective action, including no longer putting inmates who make a complaint into segregation and informing inmates of the outcome of an investigation.

Other prisons

Stevenson said the next step for the EJI is to identify problems with other Alabama prisons.

"The thing we've been concerned about is how pervasive these problems are in the system," he said.

Stevenson said it's disturbing that they're still seeing the same problems in other facilities, even though it's been a year since the Tutwiler report came out and the state has taken action.