

I Cook Foods FOI requests blocked: Crozier

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

Health authorities have blocked Freedom of Information requests over the closure of I Cook Foods for the past 18 months, according to the State Opposition.

Since March 2020, the opposition has sought information on what the then-Health Minister Jenny Mikakos, Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton and then-health department secretary Kym Peake knew about the closure of the Dandenong South commercial caterer.

Ms Mikakos and Ms Peake resigned from their positions after an inquiry into the state's hotel quarantine program last year.

The FOI requests have still been blocked by current Health Minister Martin Foley and the Department of Health, the opposition says.

The matter has been referred to a special hearing at Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT).

Opposition health spokesperson Georgie Crozier said it was "alarming that the government continues to delay the release of key documents", given the "many serious allegations" over the ICF closure.

"The Andrews Labor Government continues to avoid accountability and operate in the shadows.

"FOI requests are an important part of transparent and accountable government, and to refuse to respond in a timely manner just goes to show the contempt the Andrews Government has for Victorians."

On 25 August, a Parliamentary inquiry into the "inappropriate closure" of ICF will reconvene via ZOOM.

The witness list includes ICF director Ian [redacted], former council officers Kim Rogerson, [redacted] Christy, and former police Detective



A Parliamentary inquiry into the closure of I Cook Foods re-opens on Wednesday 25 August. 190890
Picture: STEWART CHAMBERS

Sergeant Paul Brady who has assisted in compiling evidence on behalf of ICF.

The 30-year-old family business had been closed by the Department of Health and Human Services as part of an investigation into the death of a listeria-infected 86-year-old hospital patient.

By the time it re-opened six weeks later, the business was destroyed. Forty-one employees lost their jobs.

In August 2020, the Parliamentary inquiry into the matter found the ICF closure was "valid" but "not fair".

But the inquiry has re-opened after new evidence contradicted testimony by "senior officials in the Victorian Government and City of Greater Dandenong", according to its terms of reference.

Some of the evidence includes a report by Mr Christy, which stated prior to the closure

that it was "more than likely" the deceased patient had not eaten ICF food.

ICF has consistently insisted it was wrongfully closed, including an allegation that a council officer planted a live slug during a factory inspection.

It has launched a \$50-million lawsuit against the health department and Greater Dandenong council.

Victoria Police has recently re-opened its investigation into the circumstances of the closure.

In 2019, Greater Dandenong Council laid 96 food-safety charges against ICF – all of which were dropped just before a hearing at Dandenong Magistrates' Court in late 2019.

The council stated it aimed to avoid a legal bill of up to \$1.2 million.

The State Government did not respond to Star Journal by deadline.