

iCook Foods 'lost family'

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

To her great sorrow, Ingrid Rose knows there's little chance she'll get her job back.

She is one of 41 workers whose lives were upturned when Dandenong South commercial caterer iCook Foods was effectively ruined by a health authority-enforced shutdown in February.

It only adds to the frustration that eight months later, Greater Dandenong Council dropped all 96 of its food safety charges against the company and its director Ian Cook.

Ms Rose, who is deaf and from a Creole-speaking background, found a home away from home at the factory.

Twelve years ago, iCook Foods offered her part-time work alongside her sister Sharon Confait. She was paid the full rate, not an Australian Disabilities Enterprise rate.

Ms Confait translated in Creole for Ms Rose, and helped her learn the ropes.

She proved her worth as a food prep, packer and machine operator on the factory line, gaining promotion to a full-time role.

"Even though she can't hear, she could still communicate with everyone on a daily basis," Ms Confait said.

But since February, Ms Rose has retreated to a house-bound existence.

"I do miss my job," she says.

"I miss the people because it was a family business. We helped each other out."

Ms Confait said the staff were shocked by the sudden shut-down for 36 days, which led to the loss of all of the company's contracts. It had operated without blemish during her tenure, she said.

"We never expected something like that to happen. Every time the health inspectors had come down, we had all the paperwork ready."

"The place was always clean."



Sharon Confait and Ingrid Rose lost their jobs after iCook Foods was ruined. 199610

Picture: CAM LUCADOU-WELLS

Ms Confait has found another job but re-employment is an uphill battle for Ms Rose. She doesn't know AUSLAN sign language - and training in that would take years.

At the moment, she's seeking Centrelink approval for a disability support pension - and an exemption from looking for work in the meantime.

"She has been very depressed and stayed in her room," Ms Confait said of her sister's plight.

"She doesn't go out much."

A financial strain has also been borne by Ms Rose's parents, who Ms Rose lives with.

Her father works part-time and her mother is on a pension. Ms Rose's wage helped them to pay their mortgage and bills.

iCook Foods is pursuing a Supreme Court lawsuit of at least \$26 million against the council and the Department of Health and Human Services.

In a statement, Greater Dandenong Council said it had made a "commercial decision"

- with regard to "potential large legal costs" - not to pursue the charges at Dandenong Magistrates' Court on 3 October.

"This decision was made in respect of the best use of ratepayer funds and that all non-compliance matters relating to the Food Act had been resolved."

Ms Confait said that is of little consolation for everyone in the company "from the top down".

"I hope there's justice."