

The Star-Ledger

N.J. taxpayers have spent \$630K and counting on investigations into women's prison, records show

By Blake Nelson and S.P. Sullivan

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published March 24, 2020

The outside law firm tasked with investigating the alleged beatings at New Jersey's only women's prison in January has been paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to represent the state amid a three-year federal inquiry into sexual abuse at the same facility, according to state records.

Matthew Boxer, a former state comptroller and federal prosecutor, and his firm started advising New Jersey officials in 2018 as the U.S. Department of Justice investigated allegations of sexual assault behind bars, according to a retention agreement obtained by NJ Advance Media through a public records request.

Boxer's role expanded early this year, when Gov. Phil Murphy asked him to investigate allegations that several prisoners were injured by staff on Jan. 11 and 12 at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women.

"Matt Boxer's prior work has given him knowledge into Edna Mahan that puts him in a unique position to thoroughly and efficiently conduct the State investigation," Murphy spokeswoman Alyana Alfaro said in an email. "This is one of the reasons he was selected, in addition to his demonstrated record of independence and integrity."

Outside lawyers, who can both advise and represent state agencies, are often hired by the state attorney general's office. An attorney general spokesman directed questions about the specifics of Boxer's work back to the governor's office. When reached by phone, Boxer declined comment.

In April 2018, federal investigators told New Jersey officials they were launching an investigation into Edna Mahan, according to their final report. Four months later, the state hired Boxer and his firm Lowenstein Sandler LLP for "legal services," according to the contract.

Boxer and other lawyers could earn \$400 an hour, according to the agreement, and paralegals would be paid \$90 an hour.

The firm has since earned more than \$630,000, according to state invoices. That doesn't count another bill submitted early this year that had yet to be approved when NJ Advance Media received the records in March.

Federal investigators eventually found evidence of rampant sexual abuse behind bars. When they notified the governor of their findings last spring, Boxer and one of his colleagues were copied in on the letter.

A Murphy spokesman previously promised to release the report on the alleged January beatings once it's finished.

The attorney general's criminal probe is also ongoing. Eight officers have been charged so far with either assaulting prisoners or covering up evidence of misconduct.