

# The Star-Ledger

## **N.J. spending millions to negotiate abuse lawsuits from women's prison, records show**

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The problems in New Jersey's only women's prison are costing taxpayers.

The state will likely spend almost \$2.8 million on outside lawyers amid several lawsuits alleging abuse behind bars, according to public records.

That's on top of nearly \$21 million taxpayers will have to pay out if a court ultimately approves a settlement for former prisoners, including more than 20 women who said they were sexually abused at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Hunterdon County.

Those numbers are in addition to hundreds of thousands of dollars paid to another outside advisor in the wake of a federal inquiry, and any money eventually spent on new lawsuits filed since several women said they were severely beaten by staff in January, an incident that has already led to charges against 10 officers.

New Jersey retained the outside law firm Chiesa Shahinian & Giantomasi PC in 2018, according to retention agreements obtained through a public records request. Additional contracts were drawn up as more women sued.

The state has already paid the group more than \$1.7 million, and more than a dozen invoices for another \$1 million were still waiting approval early April, according to payment records.

The prison system's legal team was led by Matthew Beck. He sat next to Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks last month during a marathon public hearing discussing years-worth of documented abuse at Edna Mahan.

When lawmakers asked specific questions about the newest incident, Beck stepped in to say the commissioner wouldn't answer because of the ongoing criminal investigation.

That included one question that has already been publicly addressed. Assemblywoman Nancy Muñoz, R-Union, wanted to know when Hicks was told about the alleged attacks that occurred between Jan. 11 and early morning Jan. 12. A prison spokeswoman previously told NJ Advance Media that Hicks reviewed "the data from the initial investigation on Jan. 14" and suspended staff "within 24 hours."

Beck didn't immediately respond to requests for comment about his role representing corrections officials.

He and partners at the firm were paid \$300 an hour, while associates could earn \$250 and paralegals \$90, according to the agreements.

That's a slightly lower rate than he was paid to lead a recent and unrelated high-profile investigation into the State Police and the Sussex County Prosecutor's Office over a sexual assault case that fell apart. For that review, which ultimately found no evidence of misconduct on behalf of law enforcement, he and his firm billed New Jersey more than a quarter million dollars, according to the retention agreement and invoices.