

THE AUSTRALIAN

Coronavirus: Hotel quarantine inquiry a lawyers' picnic

EXCLUSIVEBy **RACHEL BAXENDALE**, VICTORIAN POLITICAL REPORTER

8:31PM AUGUST 3, 2020 • 104 COMMENTS

Victorian taxpayers face a massive legal bill in addition to the \$3m set aside by the Andrews government for its hotel quarantine inquiry, as seven government departments, Victoria Police and Emergency Management Victoria each hire their own external legal teams.

All seven departments and two agencies refused to disclose which law firms they were using to represent them at the inquiry when sent a list of questions by The Australian, but the inquiry is expected to be a lawyers' picnic for Labor-aligned law firms, with the taxpayer-funded bill likely to amount to a seven-figure sum.

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews in early July appointed retired judge Jennifer Coate to conduct the inquiry, after revealing that a high proportion, if not all, of the state's second wave of coronavirus cases were genomically linked to breaches in his government's bungled hotel quarantine program.

At the inquiry's first hearing last month, senior counsel assisting Tony Neal QC listed government departments and agencies that would be called on to answer for their roles in administering the program, including the Department of Premier and Cabinet, Health and Human Services, Victoria Police, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, Treasury and Finance, Department of Justice and Community Safety, Department of Land, Water and Planning, Department of Transport, and Emergency Management Victoria.

The Australian contacted all of the organisations, asking whether they had engaged external lawyers, whether the legal representation was being funded from within the organisation's existing budget or whether additional funding had been set aside, and — if they had retained external lawyers — which law firm would be representing them.

All departments responded with similar pro forma lines, none of which provided answers to the questions about funding or which law firms had been engaged.

"The Department of Premier and Cabinet is co-operating fully with the judicial inquiry into hotel quarantine," a spokesman said. "The department has retained external lawyers to assist in its participation with the inquiry."

A DHHS spokesman provided an identical response regarding the retention of external lawyers, adding: "Legal costs incurred will be reported in the usual way."

It is understood "the usual way" involves publication of the costs in the department's annual report, which will not be released until months after the costs have been incurred.

A Victoria Police spokesman said the agency had "engaged external legal representation in relation to the current judicial inquiry into Victoria's hotel quarantine system".

A DJPR spokeswoman said the department had "engaged an external law firm to support the department's in-house

lawyers”.

“DJPR is fully co-operating with the hotel quarantine program board of inquiry process,” she said.

Other departments provided similar, if not identical, statements, with DJCS confirming its lawyers were also acting for associated agency EMV.

A spokesman for the inquiry said the departments’ and agencies’ legal expenses would be funded out of their own budgets, separately from the \$3m announced by Mr Andrews for the inquiry.

Justice Coate is expected to deliver her findings by September 25.

RACHEL BAXENDALE, VICTORIAN POLITICAL REPORTER

Rachel Baxendale writes on state and federal politics from The Australian's Melbourne and Victorian press gallery bureaux.

During her time working for the paper in the Canberra press gallery she covered the 201... [Read more](#)

More stories on this topic

- [‘Get real’: ScoMo blasts lockdown objectors](#)
- [COVID-19 case at Sydney child care centre](#)
- [Qld confirms case of community transmission](#)

Topics

[Coronavirus](#)