

Akron Beacon Journal

NEWS

Court social worker sues Akron, Summit County for alleged excessive force in 2020 arrest



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Akron Beacon Journal

Published 1:14 p.m. ET Sept. 17, 2022

A court-appointed social worker has filed a federal lawsuit claiming his rights were violated and excessive force was used when he was arrested in September 2020 while trying to access a court building.

Curtis Williams claims he was beaten, tackled, tased, handcuffed and arrested, with charges filed against him ultimately dismissed. He said he was trying to get into a court building to use the restroom.

Williams, who is Black, filed a civil rights lawsuit this week in U.S. District Court against the city of Akron, Summit County, a Summit County judge, several sheriff deputies, and a clerk in the sheriff's office. His claims include excessive force, malicious prosecution, and fabrication and spoliation of evidence.

“It is just an egregious abuse of power and an egregious violation of citizens’ most basic civil rights and it shows just how insulated from any real public accountability our public officials have become,” said Peter Pattakos, Williams’ Fairlawn attorney.

Stephanie Marsh, a spokeswoman for the city of Akron, and Deborah Matz, the general counsel for Summit County, declined Friday to comment on the lawsuit. The city and county generally don’t discuss pending litigation.

Williams' arrest followed an interaction he had with Summit County Probate Judge Elinore Marsh Stormer, whom he didn't know. The judge was concerned about Williams entering the court building through the entrance he was attempting to access.

"I look forward to testifying," Stormer said Friday, declining to comment further on the lawsuit.

Social worker was working with two court programs

Williams is a social worker for Minority Behavioral Health Group in Akron. In the fall of 2020, he had been appointed to assist with HOPE Court, a Summit County Common Pleas Court program for people with mental illness who run afoul of the law. He also was working with Valor Court, a program targeted toward veterans.

On the afternoon of Sept. 15, 2020, Williams had a session with HOPE Court participants in the courtyard outside of the Summit County Courthouse to allow for more social distancing at a time when such safety precautions were being because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the end of the session, Williams urgently needed to use the bathroom and decided to walk in through a door off the courtyard rather than taking the longer walk to the main courthouse entrance, according to the lawsuit.

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As Williams was about to walk in, Stormer was walking out. Stormer took issue with Williams going in through this door. Williams told her he worked for the court and needed to use the restroom, according to the lawsuit.

Williams continued to pull the door open to allow Stormer to exit and him to enter and Stormer pushed him in the chest away from the doorway, according to the lawsuit.

Williams walked past Stormer, planning to talk to the deputies who provide security for county court buildings to see if it was permissible for him to come in this way. Stormer, though, screamed loudly to the deputies, claiming Williams posed a security threat and had assaulted her, according to the lawsuit.

Four deputies beat, tackled, tased, pinned and handcuffed Williams on the lobby floor while passersby, looked on. This included Summit County Common Pleas Judge Alison Breaux, who appointed Williams to assist with HOPE Court, a program in her courtroom, according to the lawsuit.

Deputies took Williams to a holding cell, where he was able to use the bathroom. Williams told the deputies he worked for the court and that he had planned to ask them if he could come in through the courtyard door to use the restroom, according to the lawsuit.

Three misdemeanor charges against social worker dismissed

Williams was charged with assaulting Stormer, as well as misdemeanor counts of trespass and disorderly conduct.

The lawsuit claims sheriff personnel incorrectly stated in reports that Williams grabbed, shoved and pushed Stormer and omitted how the judge had shoved Williams.

Surveillance footage from a camera in the area captured the incident, though footage from four other security cameras wasn't preserved and was recorded over, according to the lawsuit.

A visiting judge in Akron Municipal Court dismissed the charges against Williams in May 2021 because of a speedy trial issue.

Pattakos said this situation could have been avoided if Stormer had a 30-second conversation with Williams about who he was and why he was trying to get into the building. If the judge was concerned, he said, she could have involved the deputies in this discussion.

The lawsuit claims Williams suffered economic and non-economic damages and mental, emotional and physical pain and suffering.

Williams is still employed for the same agency but is no longer doing work with two Summit County Common Pleas programs. He has been working with defendants in Summit County Juvenile Court, Pattakos said.

Attempts to resolve dispute fail, attorney says

Williams and his attorney talked with Summit County Law Department officials in an attempt to resolve this matter without a lawsuit being filed. As of Sept. 12, an assistant law director had offered no response to Williams' opening settlement demand. The lawsuit was filed Thursday.

"We made every reasonable effort to resolve this dispute amicably but the county hasn't offered a penny, so we are left to seek relief in the courts," Pattakos said.

The lawsuit seeks more than \$75,000 in punitive damages, attorneys' fees and expenses.

The suit is assigned to Magistrate Judge Bridget Meehan Brennan in federal court in Cleveland.

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