

News **Litigation**

Emery Celli Files Civil Rights Lawsuit Against NY State Prison System, Officers Over Fatal Beating of Inmate

June 17, 2025 By  **Brian Lee**

What You Need to Know

- The boutique, civil rights law firm Emery Celli has filed a lawsuit on behalf of an unarmed handcuffed inmate who was fatally beaten by correction officers in central New York.
- Months earlier, another inmate had been fatally beaten at a state prison just a mile away.
- The state has since retained Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr to conduct a holistic review of prisons.



U.S. District Chief Judge Brenda Sannes of the Northern District of New York. Credit: U.S Senate Committee on the Judiciary via Wikimedia Commons

The estate of Messiah Nantwi, a 22-year-old inmate who died after a “horrificing, savage and wholly unjustifiable” beating by central New York correction officers, filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against the state and other defendants on Tuesday.

Emery Celli Brinckerhoff Abady Ward & Maazel filed the complaint against the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, its leadership and various correction officers and sergeants in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of New York.

The case has been assigned to Chief Judge Brenda K. Sannes.

Earl S. Ward, a firm partner and counsel for the plaintiff, said in a statement: “As shocking as Messiah’s killing is, it is not an isolated incident — just three months earlier, another man, Robert Brooks, was killed by officers right across the street at Marcy Correctional Facility. These deaths are part of a disturbing pattern of violence and cover-ups in New York’s prisons that DOCCS has long ignored. We are honored to represent Messiah’s family in their pursuit of justice and accountability.”

A spokesman for DOCCS said the agency doesn’t comment on pending litigation.

DOCCS has noted that, to enhance safety, reduce prison violence and hold people accountable for any wrongdoing, it is working with the Office of General Services to accelerate the installation of fixed cameras. DOCCS currently has 11 facilities with completed fixed camera projects, and there are 17 additional facilities in the design, construction or upgrade phases.

Additionally, the department has 7,627 body-worn cameras in use in 41 of the 42 state correctional facilities, while 32 facilities have fully deployed body-worn cameras, and the remaining 10 facilities are expected to be fully deployed by the end of summer, prior to the effective date of a new law that requires officers wear them while on duty.

DOCCS’ commissioner, in response to the deaths of Nantwi and Brooks, has called on Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr to conduct a holistic review of DOCCS.

Nantwi’s fatal beating occurred March 1 at Mid-State Correctional Facility in Oneida County.

The lawsuit alleges at least 18 correction officers and sergeants either participated in the “brutal” and “unjustifiable” beating of the handcuffed and unarmed Nantwi, or those who stood by without intervening. Other defendants took part in an attempted cover-up, the complaint reads.

During the assault, officers “viciously punched, kicked and stomped on” Nantwi for more than five minutes, using fists, batons and boots to beat him, according to the lawsuit.

The prisoner was taken to a nearby Wynn Hospital in Utica, where he was pronounced dead from massive head trauma and numerous blows to his body, according to his family's lawyers.

A sergeant had mopped Nantwi's blood before law enforcement arrived, destroying evidence and preventing investigators from analyzing blood spatter evidence, the complaint continued.

An alleged cover-up was initiated by prison sergeants over breakfast at a diner the next morning, and the DOCCS workers ensued to destroy evidence, falsify reports, and a sergeant coordinated false statements accusing Nantwi of being armed with a knife that was planted in his cell, according to the lawsuit.

Nantwi had been in a shower area when he was ordered to return to his cell for a routine count. After initially refusing, he complied and returned to his cell without incident before the alleged beating.

At one point Nantwi attempted to defend himself by biting two officers through their gloves, which only intensified the prisoner's beating, the lawsuit read.

In wake of Nantwi and Brooks' fatal beatings, the state legislature recently approved a significant 10-point package of reforms of DOCCS.

If signed into law by Gov. Kathy Hochul, it would require all prisons to turn over all body camera footage to the attorney general's office when an officer is involved in an inmate death.

It would also require correctional facilities to install and maintain fixed security cameras around the clock, and triple the state Commission on Correction's composition to nine members.

DOCCS Commissioner Daniel Martuscello III and Mid-State Superintendent Bryan Hilton are also named defendants, as the complaint alleges they were aware of a longstanding pattern of violent abuse and coverups by staff, particularly by its Corrections Emergency Response Team units.

The complaint says Martuscello and Hilton failed to take meaningful action to prevent violence by staff.

"For decades, the rampant and unchecked abuse of incarcerated individuals at Mid-State has been thoroughly documented and publicized through the news media, independent research organizations, internal complaints by Mid-State incarcerated individuals and numerous civil rights lawsuits," the complaint reads.

"It is this culture of violence and brutality at Mid-State — and all across all DOCCS facilities — that allowed Mr Nantwi's fatal beating to occur," the lawsuit continues.

Said Katie Rosenfeld, another Emery Celli partner and counsel for Nantwi's estate: "Just 33 days before Messiah was killed, New York State's independent prison watchdog organization warned Commissioner Martuscello that conditions at the Mid-State prison were dangerous and deteriorated. Although 1,500 to 1,700 surveillance cameras had been scheduled for installment in the prison since 2022, none of those cameras were yet in place in 2025 when correction officers attacked Messiah. Messiah's death is the direct result of DOCCS' failure to insist on a safe and humane prison environment at Mid-State."

"DOCCS requires all correction officers with body worn cameras to wear and activate them when interacting with incarcerated individuals," added Hannah Brudney, a firm associate who's also working on the case. "Notwithstanding that Robert Brooks was killed in December 2024 – only three months before Mr. Nantwi – DOCCS took no steps to meaningfully enforce this requirement. As a result, the correction officers at Mid-State who had body cameras had no qualms turning them off or facing away as they brutally assaulted Messiah Nantwi."

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