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ECBAWM Files Federal Civil Rights Lawsuit on Behalf of Kyle Knight, Who Suffered Sexual Assault, Excessive Force, and Retaliation by Guards While in DOC Custody

Lawsuit Alleges a Retaliatory Strip Search, Use of Pepper Spray, Failure to Preserve Video Footage, and a Prolonged, Inadequate Investigation by the Department of Correction

(NEW YORK, NY) — Emery Celli Brinckerhoff Abady Ward & Maazel LLP (ECBAWM) filed a federal civil rights [lawsuit](#) today in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York alleging that New York City Department of Correction (DOC) officers sexually assaulted [Kyle Knight](#) while he was incarcerated at Rikers Island, used excessive force against him, and that jail staff failed to intervene, report, or remedy the abuse.

The complaint alleges that on the morning of September 19, 2024, while Mr. Knight was detained at the Otis Bantum Correctional Center (OBCC) on Rikers Island, Correction Officers Frantz Laurenceau and Ronnie Stafford sexually assaulted him during a retaliatory strip search by forcibly inserting a finger into his rectum, after pepper-spraying him and striking him in the head. Mr. Knight was then dragged naked from his cell, wrapped only in a sheet, and paraded past other detainees, causing severe humiliation and trauma.

According to the lawsuit, a housing-unit camera captured another correction officer filming the incident with a hand-held device. That video footage has never been produced and remains missing more than a year later, in violation of long-standing DOC policy.

“The officers at Rikers are supposed to protect us, not hurt or humiliate us. They had no right to sexually violate me. I want to hold them and the Department of Correction accountable for what they did, so that it doesn’t happen again.” said **Plaintiff Kyle Knight**.

“Officers sexually assault people in custody to show them who’s boss and take away their humanity. Sexual violence in our City jails has to end. We are standing up for Kyle Knight to hold the City and its officers accountable and obtain justice for Kyle,” said **Debbie Greenberger, Partner at Emery Celli Brinckerhoff Abady Ward & Maazel LLP**.

Allegations of Sexual Abuse and Retaliation

The complaint describes a disturbing escalation of abuse. The night before the assault, another correction officer allegedly subjected Mr. Knight to a degrading strip search, mocking his body and making sexually charged comments while Officers Laurenceau and Stafford stood by and failed to intervene. The next morning, Officer Stafford allegedly returned to Mr. Knight's cell, ordered him to undress, struck him, pepper-sprayed him at close range, and, together with Officer Laurenceau, sexually assaulted him under the guise of a search.

Despite Mr. Knight immediately reporting the sexual assault — both to a supervising captain and through the City's 311 system and the PREA hotline — the complaint alleges that Captain Jose Pichardo failed to take any action, report the incident, or ensure medical or investigative follow-up, as required by DOC rules.

Missing Evidence and Dismissed Charges

Following the assault, Officers Laurenceau and Stafford allegedly attempted to justify their use of force by claiming Mr. Knight had tried to dispose of an "unknown item." No contraband was ever found, the officers' accounts were inconsistent, and all disciplinary charges against Mr. Knight were ultimately dismissed.

The complaint further alleges that DOC officials failed to complete required investigative reports, failed to upload video evidence, and failed to complete a PREA investigation within the legally required 90-day period. More than a year later, Mr. Knight has still not been informed of the outcome of any investigation.

Prior Misconduct by Officers Involved

The complaint further alleges that the officers and supervisor involved in Mr. Knight's assault have previously been charged by DOC with excessive and retaliatory force and with submitting false or misleading use-of-force reports. According to the lawsuit, these prior charges put DOC and City officials on notice of the defendants' conduct.

A Broader Pattern at Rikers Island

Beyond Mr. Knight's individual case, the lawsuit details what it describes as a longstanding, well-documented pattern of sexual abuse, excessive force, and institutional indifference at Rikers Island. The complaint cites numerous prior incidents, media investigations, and official data showing that sexual abuse by DOC staff — often during strip searches or uses of force — remains widespread, underreported, and rarely substantiated or disciplined.

The suit alleges that the City of New York has been on notice for years of these systemic failures but has failed to adequately train, supervise, or discipline correction officers, fostering a culture that enables sexual violence against people in custody.

Claims and Relief

Mr. Knight's lawsuit brings claims for violations of his constitutional rights, including his right to be free from unreasonable force and abuse while in custody; for gender-motivated violence and violent crime under New York City law; and for negligence based on jail officials' failure to protect him and properly respond to the assault.

The lawsuit seeks compensation for Mr. Knight's injuries, punitive damages against the individual officers involved, and other relief from the court.

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