



**NAILAH K. BYRD**  
**CUYAHOGA COUNTY CLERK OF COURTS**  
1200 Ontario Street  
Cleveland, Ohio 44113

**Court of Common Pleas**

**New Case Electronically Filed: COMPLAINT**  
**May 14, 2026 11:17**

By: KEITH HANSBROUGH 0072671

Confirmation Nbr. 3854053

TERRI SIMPSON, ET AL.

CV 26 138824

vs.

CITY OF CLEVELAND, ET AL.

**Judge:** TIMOTHY MCCORMICK

**Pages Filed:** 13

IN THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS  
CUYAHOGA COUNTY, OHIO

TERRI SIMPSON, <i>Individually and as</i>	)	JUDGE
<i>Administratrix of the Estate of</i>	)	
SYMEON SYLVESTER WILLIAMS, SR.,	)	Case Number:
21519 Clare Avenue	)	
Cleveland, Ohio 44137,	)	<u>COMPLAINT</u>
	)	
Plaintiff,	)	(JURY DEMAND ENDORSED HEREON)
	)	
vs.	)	
	)	
City of Cleveland,	)	
601 Lakeside Avenue E,	)	
Cleveland, Ohio 44114,	)	
	)	
and	)	
	)	
Lieutenant Vincent Russo,	)	
c/o Cleveland Fire Training Academy,	)	
3101 Lakeside Avenue E,	)	
Cleveland, Ohio 44114	)	
Individually and in his official capacity	)	
as an employee of the City of Cleveland,	)	
	)	
Defendants.	)	
	)	

Plaintiff Terri Simpson, individually and as Administratrix of the Estate of her brother Symeon Sylvester Williams, Sr. alleges and states her Complaint against Defendants City of Cleveland and Lieutenant Vincent Russo as follows:

**INTRODUCTION AND FACTUAL BACKGROUND**

1. Cleveland Fire Cadet Symeon Sylvester Williams, Sr. (hereafter referred to as “decedent”) died on May 16, 2025, because of illegal and unlawful hazing at the City of Cleveland Fire Training Academy.

2. The hazing suffered by, endured by and inflicted upon decedent during his time in 2025 as one of only two African American cadets in his class led directly to his death.

3. Decedent left behind a loving family, including two minor children.

4. The act of hazing is an intentional tort under Ohio law.

5. The act of hazing is a crime under Ohio law.

6. The acts of hazing alleged throughout this Complaint were carried out and executed by Defendant Vincent Russo during the course and scope of his employment with Defendant City of Cleveland.

7. The acts of hazing stemmed from racial animus within Defendant City of Cleveland's Fire Training Academy and/or Defendant City of Cleveland's Fire Department against African American cadets and/or firemen.

8. All actions and/or omissions performed by Defendants in this case were intentional.

9. Decedent's race was African American.

10. Defendant Russo's race was and is Caucasian.

11. Decedent was an employee/student at Defendant City of Cleveland's Fire Training Academy in the year 2025.

12. Plaintiff Terri Simpson is the Administratrix of decedent's estate.

13. Decedent was the brother of Plaintiff Terri Simpson.

14. Plaintiff Terri Simpson was at all times relevant to this action a resident of Cuyahoga County, Ohio, and a citizen of the State of Ohio.

15. During his lifetime in the year 2025, decedent was a resident of Cuyahoga County, Ohio, and a citizen of the State of Ohio.

16. The Estate of Symeon Sylvester Williams, Sr. is currently an open estate/case in Cuyahoga County Probate Court bearing case number 2026EST303803.

17. Adminstratrix Terri Simpson received Letters of Authority from the Cuyahoga County Probate Court on January 21, 2026, and has authority to file this Complaint.

18. Defendant City of Cleveland is a unit of local government organized under the laws of the State of Ohio.

19. Defendant City of Cleveland is a political subdivision under Ohio law.

20. The Cleveland Fire Training Academy and/or Cleveland Fire Department was owned and/or a division of Defendant City of Cleveland at all times relevant to this Complaint.

21. The Cleveland Fire Training Academy is a public education institution (just as other Ohio fire training academies owned/operated by other entities such as Cuyahoga County Community College) at all times relevant to this Complaint.

22. Ohio law permits and governs Defendant City of Cleveland's operation of a fire training academy to educate, train and/or certify.

23. If he had graduated, decedent would have been eligible to join various organizations including but not limited to the Cleveland Firefighters International Association of Firefighters, Ohio Association of Professional Firefighters, the City of Cleveland Fire Department, etc.

24. The Cleveland Fire Training Academy is located in Cleveland, Ohio.

25. The Cleveland Fire Training Academy is located in Cuyahoga County, Ohio.

26. At all times relevant, Defendant Russo was an employee of Defendant City of Cleveland.

27. Defendant City of Cleveland is liable by virtue of Ohio Revised Code sections 2307.44, 2903.31 and/or 2307.60.

28. Defendant City of Cleveland is liable for the actions and/or inactions of Defendant Russo by virtue of Ohio Revised Code sections 2307.44, 2903.31 and/or 2307.60.

29. Defendant City of Cleveland is liable for the actions and/or inactions of Defendant Russo by virtue of vicarious liability as the claims arose out of an employment relationship.

30. All of the actions and/or inactions performed by Defendants in this case were performed, conducted and/or omitted with negligence, gross negligence, malicious purpose, willfully, in bad faith, in a wanton or reckless manner, with deliberate indifference to safety rights, and/or intentionally.

31. All Defendants' conduct, as described in this Complaint, was done: maliciously or with conscious disregard for the rights of Plaintiff and with a great probability of causing harm, and/or was done maliciously and/or by aggravated or egregious fraud by agents or servants of all Defendants, who, as principals or masters, knowingly authorized, participated in, or ratified those actions and/or omissions, for which all Defendants are liable.

32. Defendants conduct exhibited a conscious disregard of and/or indifference to a known, obvious risk that was unreasonable.

33. All Defendants conducted activity in Cuyahoga County giving rise to some or all of the claims at issue in this lawsuit.

34. Several and/or all of the claims for relief in this lawsuit arose, whole or in part, in Cuyahoga County.

35. The material events alleged in this Complaint occurred in or around Cuyahoga County, Ohio.

36. Personal jurisdiction is proper over Defendants under ORC § 2307.382, including but not limited to 2307.382(A)(1) and/or (3).

37. Venue is proper under Ohio Civil Rule 3, including but not limited to sections (C)(1), (3) and/or (6).

38. This Court is a court of general jurisdiction over the claims presented herein, including all subject matters of this Complaint.

39. Plaintiff is entitled to punitive damages and attorneys' fees against all Defendants.

40. Ohio Revised Code Chapter 2744 is expressly inapplicable to this Complaint by virtue of Ohio Revised Code section 2744.09(B).

41. The Ohio legislature expressly imposed liability upon political subdivisions for hazing claims by virtue of Ohio Revised Code sections 2307.44, 2307.60 and/or 2903.31 even in non-employment relationship cases, which this is not as this case involves an employment relationship.

42. Decedent was subjected to hazing including but not limited to extra physical activity.

43. Decedent was subjected to hazing including but not limited physical punishment.

44. Decedent was subjected to hazing including but not limited to denial of proper hydration and/or appropriate food during hot weather training.

45. Decedent was subjected to hazing including but not limited not being afforded appropriate rest and/or recovery over multiple days that led to a cumulative effect of creating a dangerous situation.

46. Decedent was subjected to hazing including but not limited multiple, cumulative days of overly rigorous activity without proper supervision.

47. Decedent was subjected to hazing including but not limited that designed to humiliate and/or demean him.

48. Decedent was subjected to hazing including but not limited to actions meant to punish him and/or cause him to quit the Cleveland Fire Training Academy.

49. Decedent was subjected to hazing including but not limited actions meant to punish and prevent him from becoming a full-time City of Cleveland firefighter.

50. The hazing actions and/or inactions described throughout this Complaint were motivated in whole and/or in part due to decedent's race and/or age.

51. Decedent was the only remaining African American cadet after the other African American cadet was removed from the class.

52. Due to past injuries of other cadets, Defendants knew that the hazing of decedent was highly likely to cause severe injury and/or death.

53. Defendants intentionally meant to cause the harm that resulted to decedent.

54. At 39, decedent was in his final year of being eligible to join the Cleveland Fire Training Academy.

55. Defendants did not want a 39-year-old in the class and hazed him because of that in addition to his race.

56. Decedent was subject to far more hazing in the forms described in this Complaint that any other member of his remaining class and/or cadets of other races and/or younger ages.

57. In Ohio, employees can sue employers for intentional torts, bypassing the typical workers' compensation immunity, but only if they prove the employer acted with specific,

deliberate intent to cause injury or acted with the belief that harm was substantially certain to occur under Ohio Revised code section 2745.01, just as the case here.

58. Hazing is an intentional tort that may be brought under Ohio law even if a workers' compensation claim exists and/or is viable, just as is the case here.

59. As Defendants have already taken the official position on the record that the facts comprising this Complaint dealt with an employment relationship by virtue of the Ohio Bureau of Workers' Compensation claim (Claim #25-140867) that was already addressed, Defendants are judicially estopped, barred, precluded and/or collaterally estopped from attempting to argue a different, contradictory position in this case.

60. Due to the above, no question of fact exists in this case as to the resolved issue that Plaintiff's claims arise out of an employment relationship with a political subdivision so judicial notice of this may be taken by the Court.

61. Plaintiff may recover damages in this case by virtue of the civil hazing statute contained in Ohio Revised Code section 2307.44 against Defendants.

62. Plaintiff may recover damages in this case by virtue of the criminal hazing statute contained in Ohio Revised Code section 2903.31 and Ohio Revised Code section 2307.60 against Defendants.

63. Plaintiff may recover damages for the injuries and/or death from the criminal acts enumerated under Ohio Revised Code section 2903.31 (criminal hazing) under Ohio Revised Code section 2307.60 against Defendants.

64. Defendants hazing included but was not limited to acts against decedent as part of an initiation into the Fire Training Academy, Defendant City of Cleveland's Fire Department, etc.

65. Defendants hazing included but was not limited to acts against decedent to prevent him from remaining an employee/student at the Cleveland Fire Training Academy and to prevent him from becoming a member of Defendant City of Cleveland's Fire Department.

66. Defendants hazing caused and/or created a substantial risk of causing mental and physical harm to decedent.

67. Defendant City of Cleveland and/or the Cleveland Fire Training Academy was and is an "educational institution" under Ohio Revised Code 2903.31.

68. Defendant Russo was and is an administrator, employee, faculty member, teacher, consultant, alumnus, and/or volunteer under Ohio Revised Code section 2903.31.

69. Defendant Russo is sued in both his official and individual capacities.

70. Defendants' actions and/or inactions constituted crimes under Ohio law.

71. Defendants' violations of Ohio Revised Code section 2903.31 constituted misdemeanors of the second degree.

72. Defendants participated in the hazing of decedent under Ohio Revised Code section 2307.44.

73. The hazing endured by decedent involved an "educational institution" under Ohio Revised Code section 2307.44.

74. Defendant City of Cleveland was an organization that authorized, requested, commanded and/or tolerated the hazing of decedent.

75. Defendants knew or reasonably should have known of the hazing of decedent and did not make reasonable attempts to prevent the hazing.

76. If Defendant Russo is found liable under Ohio Revised Code section 2307.44, then Defendant City of Cleveland may also be held liable under Ohio Revised Code section

2307.44 as Defendant Russo was an administrator, employee, and/or faculty member of Defendant City of Cleveland's Fire Training Academy and/or Defendant City of Cleveland's Fire Department.

77. Under Ohio Revised Code section 2307.44, the negligence and/or consent of the hazing victim and/or any assumption of the risk by the hazing victim is not a defense to an action brought pursuant to that section of the Ohio Revised Code.

78. Decedent was a victim of hazing that caused him damage during his lifetime and directly led to his death.

79. While still alive and a cadet, Defendants' actions and/or inactions caused decedent severe harm and damage.

80. Plaintiff sent a public records request to Defendant City of Cleveland on April 3, 2026, that stated: "Fire Cadet Symeon Sylvester Williams died during training at the Cleveland Fire Training Academy on May 16, 2025. The records requested are any of the following documents that pertain to this incident / death including the following categories: the complete investigatory file, any written reports and/or findings, any discipline administered, any documents regarding policy changes due to the incident, emails sent and/or received within the City of Cleveland, any videos, and any witness statements. Also, requested are any written policies dealing with Fire Cadet physical training safety/guidelines, hazing issues and discipline issues in effect during the years 2025 and 2026. In addition, this request asks for any written reports / investigatory files regarding fire cadet instances of injury and/or death due to physical training for the years 2023, 2024, 2025 and 2026 as to cadets other than the decedent named above."

81. The above detailed public records request has allegedly been fully responded to by Defendant City of Cleveland.

82. The public records response did not contain any significant investigation of any kind into decedent's death and the circumstances surrounding it, aside from a three-page incident report.

**PLAINTIFF'S WRONGFUL DEATH CLAIMS AGAINST DEFENDANTS**

83. Plaintiff restates and reavers each and every other allegation contained in this Complaint as if fully restated herein.

84. Defendants directly and proximately caused the death of decedent.

85. Defendants' acts of illegal and/or unlawful hazing caused the death of decedent.

86. Defendants are liable by virtue of Ohio Revised Code section 2125.02.

87. Defendants caused the death of decedent through their intentional conduct under Ohio Revised Code sections 2307.44, 2307.60 and/or 2903.31.

88. Ohio Revised Code section 2745.01 states that this action is viable as an intentional tort despite a workers' compensation claim.

89. Ohio's workers' compensation law do not bar this Complaint as this Complaint is entirely based upon intentional torts under Ohio law.

90. As a direct and proximate result of Defendants' unlawful conduct, Plaintiff has suffered damages and will continue to suffer damages into the future, including but not limited to mental anguish; emotional pain and suffering; grief; loss of society, love, consortium, companionship, comfort, protection, care, attention, advice, counsel, services, guidance and enjoyment of life; and pecuniary loss, including but not limited to medical expenses; funeral and

burial expenses; estate administration expenses; lost inheritance; lost net accumulations of the estate; lost financial support; lost earnings/income and lost benefits.

**PLAINTIFF'S SURVIVORSHIP CLAIMS AGAINST DEFENDANTS**

91. Plaintiff restates and reavers each and every other allegation contained in this Complaint as if fully restated herein.

92. Defendants directly and proximately caused damage to decedent Symeon Sylvester Williams, Sr. during his lifetime.

93. Defendants' acts of illegal and/or unlawful hazing caused damage to decedent Symeon Sylvester Williams, Sr. during his lifetime.

94. Defendants are liable by virtue of Ohio Revised Code section 2305.21 to decedent Symeon Sylvester Williams, Sr. during his lifetime.

95. Defendants also intentionally interfered with decedent Symeon Sylvester Williams, Sr.'s Ohio civil rights and Ohio statutory rights during his lifetime that directly caused him damage for which they are liable.

96. Under Ohio Revised Code section 2921.45, it is a crime to interfere with civil rights, including "attempting" to do so.

97. Defendants committed the crimes of attempting to interference and/or successfully interfering with decedent Symeon Sylvester Williams, Sr.'s Ohio civil rights and Ohio statutory rights during his lifetime that directly caused him damage.

98. The Ohio civil rights and/or Ohio statutory rights that Defendants attempted to and/or did in fact interfere with were the right to be treated equally in the workplace and not be treated badly/worse than others because of his race being African American.

99. Under Ohio law, employees have a statutory right to a workplace free from discrimination based on race, which decedent Simeon Sylvester Williams, Sr.'s was not afforded during his time at Defendant City of Cleveland's Fire Training Academy and/or by Defendant Russo.

100. This Complaint is expressly not alleging any violation of any federal rights.

101. This Complaint is expressly not alleging any claims under the United States Code.

102. This Complaint is expressly not alleging any violations of the U.S. Constitution.

103. This Complaint is expressly not alleging any violations of any Amendments to the U.S. Constitution.

104. This Complaint is expressly not alleging any claims under federal case law and/or federal common law.

105. This Complaint is expressly not stating any federal questions of law.

106. As a direct and proximate result of Defendants' unlawful conduct, Plaintiff's decedent suffered great harm during his lifetime for which Defendants are liable.

### **CONCLUSION**

WHEREFORE, Plaintiff respectfully requests that the Court: enter judgment in Plaintiff's favor on all claims; award Plaintiff compensatory damages sufficient to make Plaintiff whole for their injuries, damage, and loss; award Plaintiff non-compensatory damages; award Plaintiff emotional distress damages; award Plaintiff pain and suffering damages; award Plaintiff punitive damages to the extent permitted by law; award Plaintiff the cost of funeral and burial expenses; award Plaintiff reasonable attorneys' fees and costs of suit; award Plaintiff any other relief as the Court deems just and proper. All of these damages are in excess of \$25,000. Some or all of Plaintiffs' damages will continue to accrue indefinitely into the future.

**JURY DEMAND**

Plaintiff Terri Simpson, individually and as Administratrix of the Estate of Symeon Sylvester Williams, Sr. requests a jury trial on all issues and all claims triable by a jury in this Complaint.

Respectfully submitted,

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