



PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

***Washington v. Massachusetts Department of Corrections, et al.* Filed in Federal Court Filing Marks Two-Year Anniversary of Wave of Guard Assaults at Souza Baranowski Correctional Center**

Worcester, MA—January 10, 2023—Today, Derrick Washington and his lawyers at Rights Behind Bars and Amber Ashley James, Esq. filed a lawsuit in federal court, seeking accountability for brutal assaults that Mr. Washington experienced January through March 2020 at the hands of Souza Baranowski Correctional Complex (“Souza”) guards.

Mr. Washington was then, and still is, incarcerated at Souza, which is a maximum-security prison in Lancaster, Massachusetts with a long history of racism and violence. In January 2020, in response to an altercation between a small number of prisoners and guards, administrators and guards at Souza and in the Department of Corrections launched a campaign of retaliatory violence against many people incarcerated at the prison.

Mr. Washington, a long-time advocate for racial justice and rights of incarcerated people, was one of many prisoners who suffered during that campaign. On three separate days, Souza guards beat and tased Mr. Washington, causing lacerations and contusions, while calling him racial slurs and other insults. Twice, guards sprayed Mr. Washington with chemical agents, despite the fact that Mr. Washington is asthmatic and well-documented as such at Souza. The chemical agents provoked severe asthma attacks and made Mr. Washington unable to breathe. The attacks were so brutal that Mr. Washington was at times knocked unconscious and three times hospitalized. “What happened to Mr. Washington is horrific and unacceptable,” said Rights Behind Bars attorney, Sophie Angelis. “Prison guards act this way in part because they think they won’t be held accountable. Too often, they are right.”

Mr. Washington’s case is just one example of the systematic problems at Souza, where violence is common and often racialized. Souza has recently been subject to litigation filed by Prison Legal Services based on the facility’s campaign of systematic retaliatory violence in January 2020. The [class action lawsuit](#) details officers subjecting over 100 prisoners to racialized violence—including yanking and ripping out dreadlocks and braids while shouting racist comments and slurs, officers showcasing white supremacist insignia, physically assaulting prisoners, deploying taser guns and chemical agents, and using K9 units to bite prisoners. Mr. Washington’s case, along with the lawsuit filed by PLS, highlights not only the brutal assaults and deprivations of basic human rights committed by officers and prison leadership, but also the pattern and practice of racial discrimination inherent in the carceral system.

The lawsuit also honors Mr. Washington’s organizing efforts at Souza on behalf of all incarcerated people. While incarcerated at Souza, Mr. Washington has organized and advocated for issues including

racial justice, voting rights for incarcerated people, and improved conditions. As a result of his ongoing vocal advocacy, Mr. Washington has been specifically targeted for retaliation in the form of physical abuse, false disciplinary charges, and solitary confinement. Despite these ongoing abuses, Mr. Washington continues to be an active organizer within Souza, including by spearheading organizations such as the No Longer 3 Fifths Coalition, a power building group of leaders who are working to restore voting rights in Massachusetts for people who are incarcerated. He hopes that this lawsuit will expose the racial violence he and countless other prisoners have faced at Souza, and also inspire others to action to stop the horrors in Massachusetts prisons. Mr. Washington's organization, No Longer 3 Fifths Coalition, has [a call for action](#) on Saturday, February 4th from 1–3 pm. "Mr. Washington has experienced abuse, neglect, and violence that is both abhorrent, and yet characteristic of the brutality to which incarcerated people are regularly subjected," said Amber Ashley James, one of Mr. Washington's attorneys. "Mr. Washington has been a staunch advocate against these abuses for years. We hope this lawsuit affords Mr. Washington some justice for all he has endured, and discourages prison officials from trampling on incarcerated people's basic rights and humanity."

Mr. Washington is represented by Rights Behind Bars and Amber Ashley James. The complaint names as defendants the Massachusetts Department of Corrections, Superintendent Kenneway (the previous Superintendent of Souza), and over 20 lieutenants, corrections officers, and medical providers who assaulted Mr. Washington and failed to provide him with proper medical care afterwards.

A copy of the lawsuit can be found [here](#).

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[Rights Behind Bars](#) works alongside incarcerated people to challenge the cruel and inhumane conditions of confinement through litigation and advocacy.

Amber Ashley James represents plaintiffs who have been harmed by powerful institutions.