

## Man assaulted by PG officer files federal civil rights lawsuit

By: Heather Cobun

A Prince George's County man is suing a county police officer who assaulted him while he was handcuffed and belted in a police cruiser in 2018.

Andre Verdier filed suit in U.S. District Court in Greenbelt Monday against Stephen Downey, a corporal with the Prince George's County Police Department who was convicted of assault and misconduct in office last year for the incident.

Attorney Peter C. Grenier said Tuesday that Verdier is no longer homeless and has recovered from his injuries but that they had a lasting impact.

"Physically, he's recovered but emotionally, he's scarred, probably for life," said Grenier of the Grenier Law Group PLLC in Washington.

Verdier, a black man, was homeless in October 2018 when he entered a storage container outside of a business in Temple Hills around 2 a.m. and triggered a silent alarm, according to the complaint. Three officers responded to the scene and, finding Verdier asleep, took him into custody without incident.

Verdier was seated in the front right passenger seat of a police cruiser and asked for the handcuffs to be loosened, according to the complaint. Downey, who is white, allegedly opened the door, leaned in and squeezed Verdier's shoulder and forced his head down,

then walked around to the passenger side and punched him in the face and head.

"I always hesitate to suggest that there's a racial component, but I don't see anything else that could have motivated this other than bigotry. I just don't," Grenier said. "It's stunning."

Downey allegedly asked the driver of the cruiser if his vehicle had a camera before the assault, according to the complaint. Verdier was taken to a hospital for treatment due to lacerations on his face. The burglary charge against him was later dropped.

Grenier said Verdier "was in sheer terror" during the incident and had no means of defense.

Downey was charged with assault and misconduct and later convicted and sentenced in October to six months active jail time and 100 hours of community service on his release, according to the complaint.

At a news conference following the conviction, Prince George's County State's Attorney Aisha Braveboy praised the other officers at the scene who reported Downey to internal affairs and then testified against him at trial.

"In this case, it was the actions of other officers who were on the scene that evening that led us to this day, to this day of justice," she said.

Police Chief Hank Stawinski apologized to Verdier and praised the officers who reported the misconduct.



*"In this case, it was the actions of other officers who were on the scene that evening that led us to this day, to this day of justice," said Prince George's County State's Attorney Aisha Braveboy after the police officer's conviction. (The Daily Record/Maximilian Franz)*

The lawsuit alleges battery, intentional infliction of emotional distress, gross negligence, and state and federal constitutional violations. The lawsuit is against Downey personally, but Grenier said the county has said it will pay all non-punitive damages.

"The only way to get the government's attention is to hit them so hard in their wallet or their checkbook that it's cheaper for them, as a business decision, to retrain their employees and perhaps change their approach to interviewing (and evaluating) people who are going to be handed a badge and a gun," he said.

The county will hire outside counsel to represent Downey in the civil suit, according to Grenier. An attorney has not yet been retained.

*The case is Andre Verdier v. Stephen Downey, 8:20-cv-00286.*