

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
WISCONSIN

Estate of Demetrius L. Stephenson, by Special Administrator Richard
Coad v. Calumet County, Kristen Klotz, and Kristi LeClair

Estate of Stephenson · No. 22-C-956 · Decided December 16, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin denied renewed motions for judgment as a matter of law by Calumet County and HHS employees Kristen Klotz and Kristi LeClair. The court held that a reasonable jury could find that the defendants violated a pretrial detainee’s Fourteenth Amendment rights by failing to take reasonable measures to address his risk of self-harm, and it declined to apply qualified immunity or remove punitive damages from consideration. The court also allowed the plaintiff’s Monell claim against Calumet County to proceed based on the alleged conduct of an authorized policymaker.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin
WRITING FOR THE COURT	William C. Griesbach
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin
DECIDED	December 16, 2025
DOCKET	22-C-956
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	After a six-day jury trial ended in a mistrial because the jury could not reach a unanimous verdict, the HHS defendants and Calumet County renewed motions for judgment as a matter of law under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 50.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 50, judgment as a matter of law is proper only when a reasonable jury would lack a legally sufficient evidentiary basis to find for the nonmoving party. The court views the evidence and reasonable inferences in the light most favorable to the nonmoving party and may not weigh evidence or make credibility determinations.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished

TOPICS

motion for directed verdict

fourteenth amendment

section 1983

qualified immunity

municipal liability

PRACTICE AREAS

civil rights

constitutional law

civil procedure

municipal law

remedies

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the evidence permitted a reasonable jury to find that Klotz and LeClair violated Stephenson's Fourteenth Amendment rights by knowingly and purposefully failing to take objectively reasonable measures to protect him from self-harm.
2. Whether Klotz and LeClair were entitled to qualified immunity as a matter of law.
3. Whether the evidence was insufficient as a matter of law to submit the Estate's punitive-damages claim to the jury.
4. Whether Calumet County was entitled to judgment as a matter of law on the Estate's Monell claim based on LeClair's alleged conduct as a municipal policymaker.

HOLDINGS

1. The court could not conclude that no reasonable jury could find that Klotz and LeClair knowingly and purposefully failed to take objectively reasonable additional steps to protect Stephenson from serious self-harm; therefore, judgment as a matter of law was denied.
2. Klotz and LeClair were not entitled to qualified immunity at the judgment-as-a-matter-of-law stage because, if the jury found a constitutional violation on the Estate's evidence, existing precedent would have placed them on notice that failing to act in response to serious suicide risk could be unlawful.
3. The evidence was sufficient to leave the punitive-damages issue for the jury, so the court denied judgment as a matter of law on that claim.
4. Calumet County was not entitled to judgment as a matter of law because the evidence could permit a jury to find that HHS Supervisor LeClair, acting as the County's final policymaker for jail mental-health decisions, directly violated Stephenson's Fourteenth Amendment rights.

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Demetrius Stephenson was a pretrial detainee at the Calumet County Jail who reported a history of serious mental illness, hallucinations, self-harm thoughts, and prior suicidal statements. In the week before his August 20, 2019 suicide, he made additional statements about hanging himself and killing himself, expressed severe depression and hopelessness, and reported suicidal thoughts during multiple contacts with HHS personnel. The Estate alleged that HHS employees failed to take additional protective and treatment measures, including suicide watch, assessment, treatment planning, referral, or involuntary commitment, and that the County was liable under Monell.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The Estate brought a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 action seeking damages arising from Demetrius Stephenson's suicide while detained at the Calumet County Jail. Following summary judgment, the remaining claims were a Fourteenth Amendment claim against HHS employees Kristen Klotz, Shannon Teska, and Kristi LeClair, and a Monell claim against Calumet County. After trial resulted in a mistrial, the Estate dismissed its claims against Teska with prejudice, and Klotz, LeClair, and the County renewed their Rule 50 motions. The court denied both motions.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- Passananti v. Cook County, 689 F.3d 655, 659 (7th Cir. 2012)
- Martin v. Milwaukee County, 904 F.3d 544, 550 (7th Cir. 2018)
- Martinez v. City of Chicago, 900 F.3d 838, 844 (7th Cir. 2018)
- Pittman v. Madison County, 108 F.4th 561, 569-70 (7th Cir. 2024)
- Daniels v. Williams, 474 U.S. 327, 328 (1986)
- Estate of Stephenson v. Calumet County, 787 F. Supp. 3d 876, 888-89 (E.D. Wis. 2024)
- Kingsley v. Hendrickson, 576 U.S. 389, 395 (2015)
- County of Sacramento v. Lewis, 523 U.S. 833, 849 (1998)
- Taylor v. City of Milford, 10 F.4th 800, 812 (7th Cir. 2021)
- Anderson v. Creighton, 483 U.S. 635, 638, 640 (1987)
- Kisela v. Hughes, 584 U.S. 100, 104 (2018)
- Leiser v. Kloth, 933 F.3d 696, 701 (7th Cir. 2019)
- Abbott, 705 F.3d at 713
- Ashcroft v. al-Kidd, 563 U.S. 731, 741 (2011)
- City & County of San Francisco v. Sheehan, 575 U.S. 600, 611 & n.3 (2015)
- Miranda v. County of Lake, 900 F.3d 335, 349-52 (7th Cir. 2018)
- Hope v. Pelzer, 536 U.S. 730, 739, 741 (2002)
- Belbachir v. County of McHenry, 726 F.3d 975, 980-81 (7th Cir. 2013)
- Prude v. Meli, 76 F.4th 648, 659 (7th Cir. 2023)
- Smith v. Wade, 461 U.S. 30, 56 (1983)
- Monell v. Department of Social Services, 436 U.S. 658, 691, 694 (1978)
- Board of County Commissioners of Bryan County v. Brown, 520 U.S. 397, 400 (1997)
- J.K.J. v. Polk County, 960 F.3d 367, 377 (7th Cir. 2020)
- Valentino v. Village of South Chicago Heights, 575 F.3d 664, 675 (7th Cir. 2009)
- Pembaur v. City of Cincinnati, 475 U.S. 469, 480-81 (1986)
- Burger v. County of Macon, 942 F.3d 372, 374 (7th Cir. 2019)

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