

[nj.com](#)

N.J. court backs firing of cop who pepper sprayed suspect in jail cell

By Kevin Shea | For NJ.com

5-6 minutes

A New Jersey appeals court has affirmed the 2018 firing of a Trenton police officer terminated for pepper spraying a suspect inside a jail cell.

The former officer, Anthony Villanueva, was indicted by federal government for the 2017 incident on accusations he deprived the man of his civil rights. That case is pending in federal court.

In November 2017, [Villanueva fired a can of chemical spray](#) at Quaree Singletary inside a Trenton police holding cell while the cell door was closing, and then 24-year-old Singletary was inside.

The department found Villanueva violated policy, and charged him internally with conduct unbecoming a public employee and misconduct for the improper use of the spray, and later submitting a false report about the incident. He [was fired](#) in June 2018.

Villanueva appealed his firing to the state's Office of Administrative Law (OAL), which in May 2019, following testimony against him from fellow officers, upheld the termination. That decision was then [adopted by the state's Civil Service Commission](#).

The former officer and his attorney, George Dougherty, then went

to the state courts' Appellate Division, [which on Thursday sided](#) with the OAL judge's 40-page decision.

In proceedings in the OAL and the appeals court, the judge found Villanueva's reporting on the incident was starkly different from parts of the incident caught on police security cameras.

Villanueva claimed Singletary assaulted him during a phone call from jail, then had "a long struggle" to get him back in a jail cell and handcuffed, forcing him to use pepper spray.

But there was no "long struggle," the OAL judge found.

Video of the incident showed Singletary "strolling" unaccompanied down the hall leading to the jail cells and entering the cell. As the cell door began to close and was almost shut, Villanueva sprayed the chemical agent inside. He was also seen walking coming down the hall shaking the pepper spray as he approached Singletary's cell.

Villanueva argued in his appeal, among other arguments, that the OAL erred by finding that he violated state policy on using pepper spray, and Trenton police failed to conduct an adequate investigation before terminating his employment.

The appeals court fully backed the OAL judge, Jeff Masin, in his findings that Villanueva was properly terminated.

Dougherty believes the city made "a pile of mistakes" investigating Villanueva, including not interviewing his client or his supervising sergeant. He plans to appeal to the state Supreme Court.

Villanueva has several other issues pending from his four years on the Trenton police force, which all occurred in 2017.

The Singletary incident was included in a federal civil rights case

the U.S. Attorney's Office brought against [Villanueva and Trenton police officer Drew Inman](#).

Both Villanueva and Inman were charged in April 2019 with aiding and abetting each other in depriving the civil rights of [Chanzie Washington](#) in April 2017.

Washington ran from police during a traffic stop and when officers caught up with him at a fence, they ordered him to raise his arms and then climb over the fence, authorities allege. While Washington was complying, Villanueva punched him in the face.

Inman then charged at Washington and tackled him from behind, and joined Villanueva in repeatedly punching Washington in the face, according to the indictment against them. The incident was [recorded on other officer's body cams](#).

Inman is not charged in the Singletary incident.

The federal case against them was initially scheduled for trial in 2020, but has been repeatedly postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Villanueva also faces [three civil lawsuits](#) from Washington, Singletary, and Salaam Felton.

Villanueva arrested Felton in March 2017 following a foot pursuit following a reported shooting. As Felton was walking on a street, not running, Villanueva ran up behind him and punched him in the head several times before tackling him to the ground.

The video also captured Villanueva bragging about the arrest later on a phone call. "I snuck up from behind him and just punched him, he just fell," Villanueva says, mocking Felton by quoting him, "You didn't got to punch me man."

Felton said in suit that he was [beaten so badly during his arrest](#) he suffered bleeding on the brain and other injuries. All the charges against Felton were later dropped.

The three civil suits, which name Villanueva, police officials and the city, are all pending, according to attorney Robin Lord who filed them with Clifford Bidlingmaier.

Our journalism needs your support. Please subscribe today to [NJ.com](#).

Kevin Shea may be reached at kshea@njadvancemedia.com

Note to readers: if you purchase something through one of our affiliate links we may earn a commission.