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Parents of teen who died after plunging into canal file wrongful death suit against Trenton

TRENTON — The parents of a teenager who died [chasing a basketball](#) into icy waters nearly two years ago filed a wrongful death lawsuit last week saying the tragedy should have been prevented, records show.

Zay'Quan Terrell Wheeler 14, of Trenton, died after police said he fell off a foot bridge into the Delaware and Raritan Canal on Feb. 4, 2019.

His parents Ebonika Funchess and John Wheeler blamed local, state and county officials who were charged with maintaining the park because they didn't do enough to guard against the "inherently" dangerous conditions, according to the lawsuit.

The teen and others were in the 200 block of the Parkside Avenue section of Cadwalader Park when he fell in the partially frozen canal. His friends tried pulling him from the canal but he remained submerged until the fire department rescued him.

Wheeler was taken to Capital Health Regional Medical Center and [later transported](#) to the Children's Hospital of Pennsylvania where he died.

The lawsuit names as defendants the state, city of Trenton, Mercer

County, Department of Environmental Protection, the Delaware and Raritan Canal Commission and the New Jersey Water Supply Authority.

The complaint alleges counts of intentional and negligent infliction of emotional distress and violations of New Jersey's civil rights act.

The teen's parents said the loss of their son caused them physical and emotional anguish, psychological and emotional stress and humiliation.

Filed by attorneys Robin Lord and Clifford Bidlingmaier, III, the lawsuit says the named agencies didn't put up proper signs warning of the danger, failed to train employees and committed other acts of negligence that will come out during litigation.

Lord did not respond to a text message seeking comment on the filing.

Wheeler was an eight-grader at Joyce Kilmer Middle School, where he was on the basketball and track and field teams.

He also was a standout slugger with the West End Little League and Babe Ruth Baseball League, [according to his obituary](#).

The teen's principal [recalled him](#) as a respectful and diligent student who attended class every day and was "full of light and joy."