



Metro

# Family of Lawrence teen killed in gas explosions plans to sue Columbia Gas



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**Doug Sheff, right, an attorney for the family of Leonel Rondon, pictured at left, said they plan to file a lawsuit against Columbia Gas.**

By [Laura Crimaldi](#)

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The family of an 18-year-old Lawrence student who was killed last month when a series of gas fires and explosions erupted in the Merrimack Valley intends to file a wrongful death lawsuit against Columbia Gas of Massachusetts, according to their attorney.

Lawyer Doug Sheff announced the planned litigation during a news conference Thursday morning as he stood next to a [large photograph of Leonel Rondon](#) in his law office. Rondon's family did not attend.

Rondon, a student at Phoenix Charter Academy in Lawrence, died Sept. 13 after a chimney from a house that exploded toppled onto the vehicle he was sitting in on Chickering Road.

"This is a case that should touch the sensibilities of every working family in Massachusetts," Sheff told reporters. "It's so basic to all of us that we be able to live in our homes and our workplaces safely. This puts a cloud over safety for everybody in the area."

He said the claim would be filed in state court, but declined to say when the lawsuit would be initiated or how much money Rondon's family will seek.

Representatives for Columbia Gas didn't immediately provide comment on Thursday.

Sheff said the litigation would reveal that Columbia Gas was warned in 2005 that the gas delivery system was "so corroded and fraught with defects" that speedy repairs were required for safety.

By last year, he said Columbia Gas couldn't account for significant gas leaks. He said Columbia Gas and its parent company, NiSource, have reported at least 15 gas explosions since 2010.

On the day of the Merrimack Valley explosions, Sheff said Columbia Gas failed to adhere to "basic safety measures" while performing work at the intersection of South Union and Salem streets in Lawrence. He said Columbia Gas's monitoring center in Columbus, Ohio received alarms indicating that the system was overpressurized but failed to act quickly enough to avert the disaster.

"We believe that there was reckless behavior," Sheff said. "It shouldn't happen ever and it could not happen, in our opinion without reckless behavior, without a lack of care in so many areas it's just unfathomable."

The National Transportation Safety Board is investigating the disaster. [In a preliminary report released Oct. 11](#), investigators said Columbia Gas of Massachusetts failed to relocate an underground pressure sensor from an abandoned pipe during construction work in Lawrence in September, triggering a gush of gas into the local network that erupted into explosions and fires.

The construction work involved replacing aging pipes in the area with plastic lines. Investigators found the utility failed to tell the construction crew about disconnecting or relocating the sensor, allowing the device to detect a drop-off in pressure in the abandoned line and signal to a nearby control station to increase the flow of gas into the system.

That elevated gas pressure to dangerously high levels, overwhelming the system and setting off fires across Lawrence, North Andover, and Andover. Five homes exploded and 125 structures were damaged by fire.

Several lawsuits have been filed since the explosions. [One claim was brought by Omayra Figueroa](#), who lived in the Chickering Road home that exploded, causing Rondon's death. A class action lawsuit over the disaster is also pending.

Sheff said Rondon's parents and siblings continue to grieve. His school recently presented the family with a diploma for Rondon, who was in his junior year. He died on the same day he got his driver's license.

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