

Teen's family 'wants justice'

Plans to sue Columbia, saying recklessness caused death

Jordan Graham Friday, October 26, 2018



Credit: Angela Rowlings

'SEEKING REDRESS': Attorney Doug Sheff announces a planned lawsuit yesterday on behalf of the family of Leonel Rondon, the teen who was killed in the Columbia Gas explosions in Lawrence. Staff photo by Angela Rowlings

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The family of 18-year-old Leonel Rondon, the teenager killed in the Merrimack Valley gas disaster last month, plans to sue Columbia Gas and its parent company, according to a lawyer for the family.

"This was a wonderful, loving kid from a great, decent, hardworking family. There is nothing more unjust than robbing this family of that young man," said Doug Sheff during a news conference in his law office yesterday. "The family is seeking justice, the family is seeking meaning for the loss of their son, and the family is seeking redress for what has happened to their entire family."

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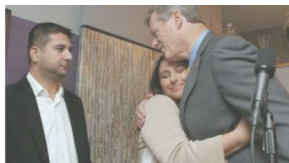
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At the press conference, Sheff said he and Rondon's family will be filing a civil lawsuit against Columbia Gas and its parent company, NiSource. Columbia, Sheff said, was reckless in its maintenance and operation of its gas systems.

"We believe there was reckless behavior. We believe there were so many things that went wrong," he said. "I've never seen such massive companies do what we think happened here and cause death in this way."

Sheff said Columbia's failure to maintain critical infrastructure and safely perform work, including on Sept. 13, directly caused Rondon's death. He also said the company's monitoring station in Ohio failed to respond to the overpressurized pipe quickly enough.

He did not say how much the lawsuit would seek in damages or when exactly it will be filed, other than to say, "I don't think it'll be too long into the future."

Massachusetts law allows plaintiffs to seek punitive damages from defendants in wrongful death suits, which by definition are designed to inflict punishment on the defendant.

"The larger the defendant, the larger the award. Only such an award will fairly provide this family meaning, and provide protection for the community going forward," Sheff said.

Sheff said Rondon was posthumously awarded a diploma from Phoenix Charter Academy in Lawrence, which the school confirmed.

"Staff and students alike knew him as the kid with a big smile who could light up the room," Sheff said. "He was so excited about his future, he was so excited about his journey, and it was indeed a bright one. Lionel had heart, Lionel cared about people."

Rondon was killed when a chimney, dislodged by a gas explosion, fell on the car he was sitting in. Rondon died the same day he received his driver's license. More than 20 others were injured, and thousands of homes are still without gas service.

Sheff said Rondon's family, who was not present at the news conference, is still grieving.

"This family wants justice," he said. "The family is committed to seeing that such a tragedy never happens again."

More On: Columbia Gas Leonel Rondon NiSource Inc

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