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Bloomfield teen sues after sex assault

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A Bloomfield teenager is suing the Essex County Department of Public Safety, contending the agency allowed him to be sexually assaulted in April while in a holding cell at family court in Newark.

The lawsuit, filed in federal court in Newark, also names Dana Hobson, director of the county juvenile detention center, Essex County Sheriff Armando Fontoura, and unidentified others who work for the county.

The 16-year-old victim, who was being held in the juvenile detention center on robbery charges, was beaten and forced to perform a sexual act on another detainee while they were in a holding cell at the Wilentz Court Complex on Washington Street on April 23, said [Vincent J. Sanzone](#) Jr., a criminal defense and civil rights attorney from Elizabeth.

[Sanzone](#) said it is "horrible" when a juvenile, who is under the care and protection of law enforcement, is allowed be sexually assaulted.

Essex County officials could not be reached for comment.

In the complaint, [Sanzone](#) said three detainees, including one who was 18, stripped the victim of his pants and underwear and beat his buttocks with a leather belt. After the beating, the victim was forced to perform a sexual act on the 18-year-old, the attorney said.

[Sanzone](#) said the 18-year-old detainee should not have been in the youth house with younger offenders.

"It was deliberate indifference to not separate the two, because you're asking for trouble when you put 18- and 19-year-olds with kids who are 15 and 16," [Sanzone](#) said. "They implicitly knew this was going to happen. It was just a matter of time."

Authorities have said the assault stemmed from a dispute between two groups of juveniles as they waited to see a family court judge.

At the time, Fontoura said the assault could have only lasted a short time because sheriff's officers had been checking the holding area frequently.

As a result of the incident, Fontoura has said 18-year-olds who are held at the juvenile facility when their charges predate their adulthood will no longer be transported with younger detainees.

NOTES: This story also appears in the EAST edition of Essex County.