

In new lawsuit filed under Child Victims Act, 25 people allege sex abuse at Cheltenham Youth Detention Center in Maryland

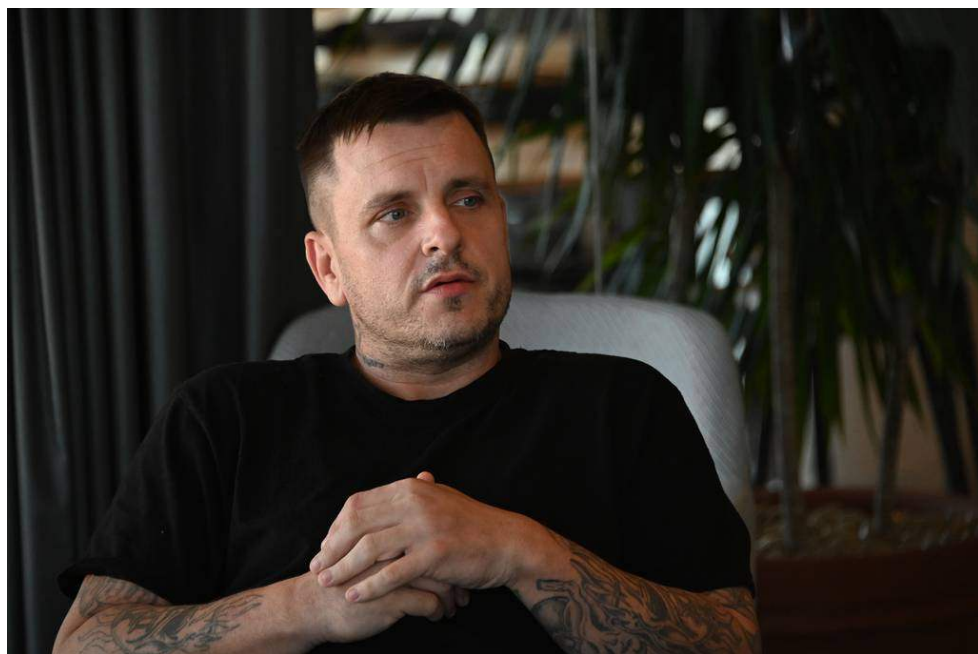
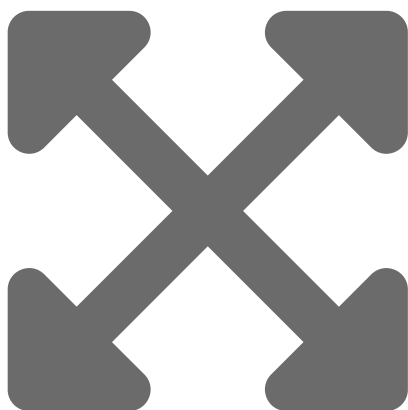
By Cassidy Jensen and Jonathan M. Pitts

Baltimore Sun • Published: Nov 16, 2023 at 11:02 am



Thank you for supporting our journalism. This article is available exclusively for our subscribers, who help fund our work at The Baltimore Sun.

Expand



Mark Russell Sr. is among 22 men and three women who are plaintiffs represented by the law firms Levy Konigsberg LLP and Brown Kiely LLP in a lawsuit against the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services under the Child Victims Act. (Kim Hairston/Baltimore Sun)

After Mark Russell Sr. stole his grandmother's car to go joyriding, his family hoped a stint in juvenile detention would straighten him out.

Russell was a wild Baltimore teenager in the mid-1990s, reeling from the death of his father, a disabled alcoholic he had spent his early life both caring for and fearing, he said in an interview with The Baltimore Sun this week. When he was about 13 years old, he landed at Cheltenham Youth Detention Center for the first of three stays between about 1995 and 1997.

During his confinement, a guard sexually abused him, according to a lawsuit filed Thursday. His grandmother, his caretaker, died during the same period, he said. Instead of turning his life around, juvenile detention left him with lasting scars that he said helped fuel years of drug addiction.

Now 41, Russell is part of a group of more than two dozen men and women who allege in the lawsuit that they were sexually abused by staff at the juvenile detention center in Prince George's County decades ago, some when they were as young as 10. The Sun does not identify people who have been sexually abused without their consent, but Russell agreed to use his name in this story and is named in the complaint.

TODAY'S TOP VIDEOS

Top Videos: - FDIC Chairman Recants Testimony on Toxic Workplace Investigations

menu

The 25 plaintiffs join at least **50 others who are suing the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services in a series of six lawsuits that were filed in October**, when a state law lifting the statute of limitations on sexual abuse lawsuits took effect.

In one of those early October suits, 10 men and women identified in court filings as John Does and Jane Does filed a complaint alleging abuse at Cheltenham in

particular. An answer from defendants in the six cases is due in January, according to a spokesperson for the four firms bringing those cases.

In the latest complaint, filed Thursday in Baltimore City Circuit Court, attorneys at New York firm Levy Konigsberg LLP and Maryland-based Brown Kiely LLP wrote that Cheltenham has been for decades a “hotbed of sexual abuse.” Most of the victims in the case are men, but three women also said they were abused at the co-ed facility. Many, like Russell, came from Baltimore.

“Despite widespread reports, federal and state investigations and multiple campaigns to close the facility, the State of Maryland has allowed Cheltenham’s culture of abuse to flourish unabated,” attorneys wrote in the complaint, which lists a series of **investigations** that **revealed brutal conditions** and **abuse** at the facility across several decades. The complaint said the state failed to adequately supervise staff and enact sufficient procedures for reporting and preventing abuse. It also claimed that similar abuse continues to this day.

Eric Solomon, communications director for the Department of Juvenile Services, did not immediately comment on the complaint Thursday morning.

When the six lawsuits were filed last month, Solomon wrote in an email to The Sun that the department was aware of “these allegations from decades ago.”

“DJS takes allegations of sexual abuse of children in our care very seriously and we are working hard to provide decent, humane, and rehabilitative environments for youth committed to the Department,” Solomon said in the email last month.

“The Department is currently reviewing the lawsuits with the Office of the Attorney General.”

Jerome Block of Levy Konigsberg, lead counsel for the plaintiffs in the lawsuit filed Thursday, said his firm is representing more than 125 individuals abused at different facilities run by the Department of Juvenile Services, including clients who say they were sexually abused within the last five years. “There’s nothing that would indicate to us that there’s been any real changes,” Block said.



Jerome Block is an attorney with Levy Konigsberg LLP. The law firm filed a lawsuit with Brown Kiely LLP against the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services on behalf of 22 men and three women on Thursday. The plaintiffs, who allege that they suffered abuse at the Cheltenham Youth Detention Center, are suing under the Child Victims Act. Mark Russell Sr., one of the plaintiffs, is in the background. (Kim Hairston/Baltimore Sun)

Staff, including guards, counselors and nurses at the facility, sexually abused children in cells, showers and laundry rooms, according to the complaint. Some victims say multiple staff forced them to engage in sex acts, including five different adults in the case of one client. The complaint said abusers threatened children with solitary confinement and beatings if they refused and rewarded them with extra phone time or food if they complied.

“We believe that this is beyond negligent, that there’s been a culture of abuse, a culture of secrecy,” Block said. “Sexual abuse of children simply cannot take place with this frequency and at this magnitude without there being negligence, and then really a cover up of the abuse, and a culture that just does not respect the humanity of children.”

A counselor who abused a boy in a shower when he was between 10 and 12 years old gave him extra snacks the next day, according to the complaint. Several staff

members raped a girl around the age of 14 or 15 at least 20 times, threatening her with a loss of privileges and offering her cigarettes and more time outside. A unit manager abused a boy when he was about 12 or 13 years old and said if he told anyone, he would be sent to an adult jail or put in solitary confinement.

Under the Child Victims Act, the state law passed by the Maryland General Assembly this year, these men and women, mostly in their 30s and 40s, now have the ability to pursue justice in the civil courts, and in many cases, try to learn for the first time the identities of the staff they say abused them as children. The complaint does not list a dollar amount for damages, but it does specify the plaintiffs will seek a minimum of \$30,000 in each case. Judgments in civil cases are capped at \$890,000 for public entities in Maryland.

This month, the Catholic Archdiocese of Washington filed the **first known constitutional challenge** to the Child Victims Act. Maryland Attorney General Anthony Brown said in a statement Tuesday that he would defend the law's constitutionality in court.

Plaintiffs including Russell said the chance to sue the juvenile system is empowering, providing an opportunity to hold the state accountable.

Four of them met in person for the first time Tuesday in a sunny conference room in South Baltimore.

Each said it was healing to meet others abused at Cheltenham, in large part because they said staff who targeted them isolated victims from one other to keep them quiet.

"As I was sitting here watching them, I pictured the children that they were when they were getting victimized, and it made me angry," Russell said after the meeting. He said the lawsuit is not about money, which can't remove his pain. His hope is simple: "No child ever gets sexually abused in the justice system again."

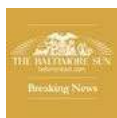
Russell first shared the abuse with a therapist two years ago. His secret festered inside him like a cancer, he said, for 25 years. "It kept me sick, I know it did," he said.

In interviews with The Sun, seven of the plaintiffs described how the abuse took a toll on the rest of their lives, contributing to addiction, damaged relationships

and incarceration in the adult system. One man identified as A.Y., who according to the complaint was abused in a shower, said he couldn't bring himself to bathe his infant son for fear of making his child uncomfortable. Others said they had wrongly blamed themselves for years, questioning how they could have provoked sexual attention from staff who were supposed to keep them safe.`

Russell was abused about seven times during his second stay at the detention center, according to the complaint. A male guard came into his cell and threatened him, saying if the teen refused to perform oral sex on him, he would have gang members attack him. Russell said in an interview there was no grievance process at Cheltenham and no way to report his attacker.

Plaintiffs interviewed by The Sun said Cheltenham staff didn't wear nametags or share their names with children held there. The complaint described some staff using nicknames or physical descriptions.



Breaking News Alerts

As it happens

Be informed of breaking news as it happens and notified about other don't-miss content with our free news alerts.

By submitting your email to receive this newsletter, you agree to our [Subscriber Terms & Conditions](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).

>

The Sun was not able to confirm Russell's juvenile offenses because those records are sealed, but he said his grandmother hoped serving time in juvenile detention would help him. "She thought there would be some kind of reform," Russell said. Instead, he said kids at Cheltenham taught him better methods for stealing cars.

After his grandmother died and he left Cheltenham, he said he moved in with a relative and endured physical abuse from family members. He started smoking cannabis to cope, then developed a heroin addiction in his early teens. A string of crimes, including theft and drug possession, had him in and out of prison.

"I had this gaping hole inside and it was empty and hurtful. Whether I was grieving my grandmother or my father, or it was the sexual abuse, I can't pinpoint," Russell said.



Mark Russell Sr. is among 22 men and three women who are plaintiffs represented by the law firms Levy Konigsberg LLP and Brown Kiely LLP in a lawsuit against the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services under the Child Victims Act. They allege that they suffered abuse at the Cheltenham Youth Detention Center. (Kim Hairston/Baltimore Sun)

He loves his three children — a son, a daughter, and another daughter who died recently — but he never felt as close to his son as to his daughters, something he thinks may be linked to his abuse. “I’m not saying I don’t love my son: The way I was raised by a man is not to show love to another man. And I’m sure being sexually abused by another man didn’t help that with my son,” he said. “It’s not his fault that this happened to me.”

The abuse has left Russell with an extra dose of vigilance. In his dorm at Helping Up Mission, an organization that provides housing to homeless men recovering from addiction, he said, he gets fully dressed in a shower stall to avoid being physically exposed among other men, even ones he calls friends. He sleeps fully clothed at night and makes sure he always has a layer of blankets over him.

Now in recovery, Russell hopes to become a peer recovery coach so he can guide others through overcoming addiction. He also wants to speak out for kids who suffer poor conditions in juvenile detention, not only those who were sexually abused.

“I’m going to be a huge advocate now that I’m able to openly speak about the sexual abuse, which I hadn’t been for many, many years,” Russell said. “Now that I’ve broke that seal, I’m not going to let it shut back up.”



