

LOCAL NEWS

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Landlord sued over deadly collapse

Action says he had neglected deterioration of fire escape that fell, killing one, injuring two.

By Michael Boren
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PHILADELPHIA A civil lawsuit filed Monday alleges that the owner of a Center City building had failed to repair a deteriorating fire-escape balcony that collapsed this month, killing one resident and injuring two.

Albert Suh, 22, died and Laura O'Brien, 24, was injured when they and a third person fell from the fourth-floor fire escape balcony Jan. 12. Alex Khorram, a landlord from Newtown Square who owns and manages the building at 22d and Locust Streets, was named as a defendant, along with his company, Khorram Group L.P.

The other person injured in the collapse, a roommate of Suh and O'Brien, did not join in the suit.

O'Brien's and Suh's parents are each seeking more than \$50,000 in the suit, filed in Common Pleas Court. The lawsuit

blames the collapse on extensive corrosion that weakened the balcony and alleges that Khorram failed to repair it. The suit further alleges that Khorram never told residents of the potentially hazardous condition.

Khorram could not be reached for comment Monday. The suit claims that he "knew or should have known" of the balcony's condition, and that the balcony was crumbling "well before" the collapse.

Shanin Specter, a lawyer representing O'Brien's and Suh's parents, said he hoped the suit would cause landlords to keep a better eye on fire escapes.

"We can't go backward and cause this incident not to happen," Specter said. "We can't return Albert Suh's life to him, nor Laura O'Brien's unbroken back. But I think there's a reasonable chance we can make this kind of event less likely."

Philadelphia officials say building owners are responsible for maintaining fire escapes. The city typically only inspects fire escapes on smaller buildings, such as the one where Suh and his roommates fell, if someone files a complaint. No com-



Laura O'Brien broke her back in the Jan. 12 accident.



Albert Suh fell 43 feet headfirst to his death.

plaints had been filed against the building before the collapse, making it unclear whether the fire escape had been inspected since its construction more than a half-century ago.

Following the collapse, the Department of Licenses and Inspections cited the building for violations involving fire escape stairways, landings, and steps. The violations do not carry fines, but L&I can take owners to court if they fail to address the violations.

That appears unlikely in this case, L&I spokeswoman Rebecca Swanson said. After the collapse, she said, Khorram had an

engineer look at the fire escape and begin repairs. Swanson said she believed the repairs started Jan. 17 and were expected to be completed "quickly," though she did not have an update Monday evening.

The collapse happened after Suh, O'Brien, and their roommate walked out onto the balcony during a birthday party they were hosting. The platform broke free, plummeting the three 43 feet into an alley, the suit said. Suh, who fell headfirst, was pronounced dead at Hahnemann University Hospital.

O'Brien suffered severe back injuries and received more than 60 stitches on her leg, and underwent depression and humiliation, the lawsuit says. She teaches kindergarten at Grover Cleveland School in the city's Tioga section.

Suh was a financial analyst at JPMorgan Chase & Co. and a recent graduate of Pennsylvania State University. Neither his parents nor O'Brien were ready to talk about the collapse, their lawyer said.

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