

The Star-Ledger

N.J. taxpayers paid almost \$70 million to settle lawsuits against the state last year

By Blake Nelson

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published Dec. 23, 2020

New Jersey taxpayers paid more than \$69.4 million last year because of accusations of wrongful death, government abuse and other claims, according to records obtained by NJ Advance Media through a public records request.

That amount was offset by the almost \$83.5 million the state recovered in its own claims, especially from petroleum, chemical and car companies.

Both amounts were some of the lowest in years.

Lawyers with New Jersey's Division of Law, which is part of the state attorney general's office, handle both sets of cases.

"I'm proud of the ongoing work of the Division of Law and what we've accomplished on behalf of New Jersey residents," Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said in a statement. "I anticipate more excellent work from them in 2021."

Payouts

Thirteen payouts from the state exceeded \$1 million.

The largest went to Jason Gillespie, who received \$12.75 million after being hit by an NJ Transit bus. The accident left him with a permanent brain injury, his lawyer said. NJ Transit previously declined comment.

Several settlements targeted hospitals, and a Middlesex County woman left paralyzed during back surgery received \$5 million.

There were 306 payouts overall.

At least nine involved law enforcement, including six for the State Police, and led to more than \$639,000 in payouts.

Jack Levine received a quarter million, the largest amount for a law enforcement case.

A trooper searched Levine for marijuana on the side of the road three years ago, a search Levine said was overly invasive and that was partially captured on video.

The officer "put his hand down his pants and went from his tailbone, down the crack of his buttocks to the front near his genitalia," a lawsuit later said, "then put his hand in his front and groped his genitalia and moved his private parts around."

A State Police recruit was also paid \$100,000 after she accused an academy trainer of “endless sexual harassment.”

A lawyer for the instructor, Trooper Stephen Spitaleri, denied the charges, and the State Police did not admit wrongdoing.

A State Police spokesman declined comment on both cases.

Recoveries

Fifteen cases the state made against people and companies accused of wrongdoing pulled in at least \$1 million each.

That included \$7.7 million the state’s environmental department took from Novick Chemical, a company that had long refused to clean up underground pollution in Newark, and \$7.8 million over similar pollution by another group in Phillipsburg.

Novick Chemical has largely disbanded.

After the consumer reporting agency Equifax lost Social Security numbers and other information from millions of New Jersey residents in 2017, the state received \$6.3 million. Equifax had to pay more than \$600 million overall, and officials previously said it was the largest data breach lawsuit in U.S. history.

New Jersey also received more than \$5 million from Fiat Chrysler Automobiles and Robert Bosch, after the state accused the car manufacturer of lying about its vehicles’ emissions.

The company stressed the settlement was not an admission of wrongdoing.

New Jersey received a total of 1,397 payments, including many smaller fines paid by individuals.