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EDUCATION

Hazing lawsuit against Rutgers students would make history. Is the frat taking action or taking cover?

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The former Alpha Sigma Phi fraternity house on College Avenue in New Brunswick. Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media



By [Victoria Gladstone | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

A national fraternity [plans to sue its former Rutgers University chapter members](#) for allegedly hazing a student who was left critically injured — even as questions linger about what happened that night.

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Alpha Sigma Phi announced Jan. 12 that it intends to file civil claims nearly three months after a student was critically injured at its New Brunswick chapter house.

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Anti-hazing advocate Jim Piazza, who became a national voice on the issue after his son Timothy died in a 2017 hazing event at Penn State, said the lawsuit would be historic.

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"The fraternity suing the members is groundbreaking," said Piazza. "I'm not aware of it happening before."

The Rutgers student, who has not been identified by the university or local authorities, was hurt on Oct. 15, 2025, and taken to the hospital. The 19-year-old from Matawan was later listed in stable condition, though his current status has not been released.

The unprecedented lawsuit — believed to be the first time a college fraternity has sued its own members over alleged hazing — has drawn praise from some anti-hazing advocates.

But it also has some legal experts questioning the fraternity's motivation.

The Middlesex County Prosecutor's Office has not released any information about its investigation into the incident.

Officials said on Jan. 29 that no charges have been filed yet, as their investigation is still ongoing.

"These students have not been charged, let alone convicted," Joseph Lento, the founder of the LLF National Law Firm, told NJ Advance Media.

"Yet they are now defendants in a high-profile civil suit brought by the very organization that once chartered them," he added.

The fraternity said the lawsuit will target any former member who was involved in the alleged hazing and anyone who saw the messages in the chapter's GroupMe, knew what was planned and failed to intervene.

"This represents one of the most significant legal actions taken by a national fraternity," Gordy Heminger, president and CEO of Alpha Sigma Phi Fraternity, said. "The members deliberately violated our guidelines on hazing and amnesty reporting."

Heminger said the former members of the fraternity were given notice of the intent to file a lawsuit two weeks ago.

The national fraternity closed down the Rutgers chapter after Heminger said the [organization found evidence of hazing](#) when the student was severely injured.

But questions remain about whether the conditions of the house played a role in the student's injuries.



The 11-unit Alpha Sigma Phi fraternity house on College Avenue in New Brunswick was deemed uninhabitable by officials, citing a string of failed inspections. Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media

A house with a troubled past

Inspection records from the frat house where the incident occurred paint a troubling picture. The Alpha Sigma Phi fraternity house at 106 College Avenue was in disrepair.

City officials declared the 11-unit property as uninhabitable just days after the incident, citing a string of failed inspections. A \$10,000 fine was issued for violations earlier in the year.

The fraternity said it does not own or manage the property.

The organization says the property is owned by a separate local 501(c)(7) housing corporation, though available public records do not make the ownership structure entirely clear.

A parent of a former member of the Rutgers chapter told NJ Advance Media she believes the unsafe living conditions is what led to the victim's injury, not hazing.

Rutgers police responded to the College Avenue residence after an emergency call was disconnected, according to the Middlesex County Prosecutor's Office.

The mother, who asked not to be named to protect her son's privacy, said the injured student was electrocuted after coming into contact with exposed wiring in the basement.

According to her account, a group of students was listening to music in the dark when the incident occurred, and they rushed him to the hospital out of concern for his safety.

Heminger, the head of the national fraternity, denounced the mother's claim in a statement and said water was involved in the incident.

"This was not students just listening to music in the dark as was claimed by an anonymous parent," Heminger said. "This was hazing. We are still trying to determine who and how many people were involved but we believe it will be double digits when all the facts come out."

Nearly three months later, the house remains vacant — a stark reminder that the problems extended beyond fraternity culture.



Fraternity members move out of the former Alpha Sigma Phi fraternity house at Rutgers University on Saturday, October 25, 2025. Dave Hernandez | For NJ Advance Media

A highly unusual lawsuit

Lento said that the proposed lawsuit is "highly unusual" and he has never seen a national fraternity sue its own chapter members while a criminal investigation was still open.

"The risk is that it collapses the distinction between alleged misconduct and proven wrongdoing," Lento added.

From a defense perspective, Lento said this lawsuit announcement is "startling" and weaponizes civil legal proceedings against students who are already under intense scrutiny.

"What I have seen are institutions and organizations quietly repositioning themselves behind the scenes," said Lento. "This is different. It is public, preemptive, and punitive."

David Bianchi, an attorney with Stewart Tilghman Fox Bianchi & Cain who represents hazing victims, said he has never seen a lawsuit like this before.

"You have to ask: what is the fraternity hoping to achieve, other than just sending a loud and clear message to fraternity members everywhere that you may be getting sued by the national headquarters as well?" said Bianchi, who is based in Florida.

He said the first thing he wants to know is what damages the national fraternity says the Rutgers members caused.

"There are plenty of people who are going to be pointing the finger at the national headquarters of this fraternity because of what this chapter did," said Bianchi.

Bianchi said the national organization "may have decided that the best way to get in front of this is to be proactive and to assert, on their own behalf, claims against the offenders," which he suggested could be an effort to show they are acting quickly and meaningfully.

He said the fraternity might use the information to try to reduce how much money it could be required to pay the victim and his family.

A rare lawsuit — and a victory for advocates

Piazza's son, Timothy, tragically died in a hazing-related incident while attending Penn State University in 2017.

Piazza said it was "ridiculous" the charges have not been filed yet by the prosecutor's office.

"This is a significant moment for fraternities," said Piazza. "Any fraternity that is serious about not promoting or condoning the hazing behavior should be watching and they should be following this."

In 2021, the state enacted [Timothy J. Piazza's Law](#) to toughen penalties for hazing within fraternities and other student groups.

Todd Shelton, executive director for the Hazing Prevention Network, told NJ Advance Media he applauded the national organization for their efforts in taking legal action.

"If they felt that incident was severe enough, which clearly they did, I think this is probably the only other action within their toolset that they can use to hold those students accountable," Shelton said.

The prosecutor's office said the victim was released from the hospital but is still receiving treatment for his injuries, though it is still unclear what those injuries are.

Bianchi said he's not surprised police are still investigating the night the 19-year-old was hospitalized, citing the lengthy process of interviewing individuals for a case like this.

Rutgers University is conducting its own separate review of the incident and has updated its [anti-hazing policy](#) in compliance with federal laws, according to a spokesperson.

The spokesperson added that the institution does not comment on student conduct matters, citing privacy laws.



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