

## Pa. Jury Returns \$39.5M Verdict Against Health Care Management Co. Following Quadruple Homicide

The suit focused on claims that health care providers failed to submit the required "gun form" notifying authorities that he was legally barred from possessing a firearm, and that defendants failed to properly evaluate him the last time they treated him.

April 08, 2026 at 02:43 PM By  Riley Brennan



Photo: Jason Doiy/ALM

A Pennsylvania jury has hit two health care providers with a nearly \$40 million verdict over allegations that they failed to treat a mentally ill man, who murdered several family members after he was discharged from their care.

On Tuesday, a Philadelphia jury awarded \$39.5 million to surviving family members of the fatal shooting, finding defendants Horizon Mental Health Management and Mercy Catholic Medical Center liable in the wrongful-death case, according to attorneys who tried the case.

Mercy Catholic, which is also known as Mercy Fitzgerald Hospital, had settled out of the case prior to trial.

According to court records, Horizon had been providing management services to Mercy Catholic, which is where the man, Maurice Louis, had been treated before the fatal shooting. The suit, *Estate of Woodson v. Horizon Mental Health Management*, focused on claims that the health care providers failed to submit the required "gun form" notifying authorities that he was legally barred from owning a firearm, and that defendants failed to properly evaluate him the last time they treated him.

Colin Burke of Kline & Specter and Jeffrey Goodman and Douglas Disandro of Saltz Mongeluzzi Bendesky represented the estates of the deceased family members.

Burke said the trial team emphasized that there was no evidence that Horizon submitted the required gun form to the county, which, he argued, would have prevented Louis from purchasing a firearm. According to Burke, the team also highlighted Horizon's lack of formal process or oversight for submitting gun forms, noting that witnesses agreed the form was the sole safeguard preventing individuals like Louis from obtaining firearms.

Given those stakes, he said, Horizon should have had clear policies and multiple layers of oversight. Further, Burke noted that the team pointed to safeguards Horizon had allegedly implemented after the incident, arguing that those changes demonstrated Horizon's control over, and responsibility for, the process.

"Responding only to quadruple murders of family members is not a reasonable approach to providing good care," Burke said. "Be proactive, not reactive."

Goodman also told The Legal that the team's strategy focused on highlighting contractual provisions showing Horizon's responsibility for managing the program and developing its policies and procedures. He said they emphasized to the jury that widespread staff failures to follow those policies reflected systemic issues with Horizon's program.

The suit stems from the 2019 fatal shooting of Louis' mother, Janet Woodson; stepfather, Leslie Holmes Jr.; and two brothers, ages 18 and 7, following what plaintiffs allege were systemic failures in mental health care and firearm-restriction safeguards.

According to the plaintiffs' pretrial memo, Louis had been involuntarily committed to Mercy Fitzgerald's psychiatric unit in June 2018 after his mother reported that he was expressing violent, homicidal, and suicidal thoughts. Mercy and Horizon, however, allegedly failed to submit the required notification to the Philadelphia Office of Behavioral Health, which is responsible for forwarding the information to the Pennsylvania State Police. Under state law, that notification is required to bar an individual from legally purchasing or possessing a firearm.

In 2019, Louis' mother brought him to Mercy Fitzgerald again with similar concerns. However, the plaintiffs claim that Louis wasn't properly evaluated, never seen by the on-duty psychiatrist, and was discharged without a meaningful assessment.

The pretrial memo further alleges that Louis purchased a shotgun the day after he was turned away, which the plaintiffs claim should have been legally barred due to his prior commitment. The plaintiffs alleged that the defendants' continued operation, systemic deficiencies, and lack of access to psychiatric care directly contributed to the deaths and constituted a breach in the duty of care.

In its pretrial memo, Horizon argued that it owed no duty to the plaintiffs, asserting that it was contracted solely to provide administrative services to Mercy Fitzgerald. Horizon claimed it did not provide direct medical care to any patients, including Louis, and that none of the physicians, nurses, intake workers, mental health technicians, or other direct caregivers were Horizon employees. Horizon further asserted that the plaintiffs failed to allege any evidence showing that individuals responsible for completing or submitting the required "gun form" were employed by Horizon.

According to Burke, the trial lasted two and a half weeks, with the jury reaching a verdict late afternoon Tuesday. The jury deliberated for about two hours on the compensatory damages, and less than 30 minutes on the punitive damages award, he noted.

The jury ultimately awarded \$9.5 million in compensatory damages against both defendants, with Horizon having to pay 35% of the compensatory damages, which is approximately \$3.3 million. The jury also awarded \$30 million in punitive damages, \$15 million of which is against Horizon.

William E. Mahoney Jr. of Stradley Ronon Stevens & Young, in Philadelphia, represented Horizon and did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

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