

Osceola sheriff, deputies face civil rights lawsuit in killing of Jayden Baez



Osceola Sheriff Marcos López speaks at a press conference on Tuesday, November 9, 2021. (Rich Pope/Orlando Sentinel)



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Lawyers for the family of Jayden Baez filed a civil rights lawsuit against Osceola County Sheriff Marcos López and two deputies accused of excessive force in [killing the 20-year-old and injuring two others in a Target parking lot](#) last year while trying to apprehend them for suspected shoplifting.

The federal lawsuit claimed the deputies, who were practicing “dynamic vehicle takedowns” as part of training exercises near the store before the April 2022 shooting, opted to demonstrate those tactics on Baez’s car as deputies monitored the alleged theft of about \$46 in pizza and Pokémon cards.

According to the legal complaint, two deputies followed Baez’s companions, Michael Gómez and Joseph Lowe, into the store and back to Baez’s car without stopping them as they allegedly stole the merchandise.

When they got back to the car, unmarked vehicles quickly boxed them in without immediately activating their lights. Deputies Scott Koffinas and Ramy Yacoub, who were named in the lawsuit along with López, fired at the car as Baez tried to flee.

The complaint identifies Yacoub for the first time as having fired the fatal shots that struck Baez multiple times in the chest.

Gómez and Lowe were both injured in the shooting, with Lowe losing a finger after being shot in both hands as they were raised. A fourth passenger, who was a minor at the time, was unscathed.

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“The Osceola County deputies entirely created the situation by the exercise of their illegal, unconstitutional, reckless, and irresponsible actions,” said Mark NeJame, whose law firm is representing Baez’s family and the surviving victims.



Left to right, Attorney Mark NeJame; Alejandro Baez, the father of Jayden Baez; and attorney Albert Yonfa, during a press conference, on Tuesday, May 16, 2023. (Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/ Orlando Sentinel)

López, whose agency is also [facing a public corruption probe](#) related to the shooting, fostered “an agency-wide culture of escalating minor criminal offenses into violent and deadly scenes,” according to the lawsuit, which points to the takedowns being against agency policy, which allows them only when a suspect is accused of a “forcible felony.”

It further referenced [comments López made to WOFL-Fox 35](#) that his deputies were “justified in all their actions.”

“Shortly after the incident, it was announced the individuals who damaged several police cars, caused injury to one deputy, and placed several other deputies in fear for their lives would be suing the Osceola County Sheriff’s Office. This announcement is not unexpected. We look forward to the facts being told in a court of law,” an Osceola County Sheriff’s Office spokesperson told WESH-Channel 2.

NeJame, in a follow-up statement, replied, “The fact is, the damage caused to police vehicles, which preoccupies Sheriff Lopez, was caused by Deputies ramming their vehicles into the one driven by Jayden Baez just before they fired blindly into it. The Deputies created the deadly confrontation with their reckless actions.”

“The disconnect from reality is troubling,” he added, “but shows, once again, that Sheriff Lopez endorses the actions of the Deputies that night who acted according to his policies and procedures.”

[Use-of-force experts have also questioned the tactics used by deputies](#), with one calling it “really aggressive policing” to perform a vehicle takedown in response to a petit theft, a misdemeanor. The only video of the scene was taken by a Target surveillance camera, as deputies were not wearing body cameras at the time.

“Defendant Lopez not only condoned, but encouraged the use of dynamic vehicle takedowns as a response to alleged petit theft occurring within a retail store as part of his ‘by any means necessary’ law enforcement model,” the complaint said.

[The long-anticipated lawsuit](#), filed Wednesday but announced Thursday morning by NeJame, is separate from one filed against the Target Corporation in May, which accuses store employees of being complicit in the lead-up to the shooting.

It also comes about a week after State Attorney Andrew Bain announced a [grand jury will decide whether charges will be filed against Koffinas and Yacoub](#) as part of a new policy aimed at shortening the time it takes to review uses of force by law enforcement.

He called the 17-month investigation into the Target shooting, which was led by Monique Worrell [before she was suspended](#) as state attorney, “an unacceptable timeline.”

“We have to get these families some closure, and we have to get the officers whether they’re going to be prosecuted or if they’re going to be back on the streets,” Bain said at a press conference last Thursday.

Bain said the grand jury will not be hearing evidence regarding an investigation into alleged corruption in the Sheriff’s Office related to the shooting, the existence of which was [first announced to reporters by NeJame](#) and later confirmed by Worrell, who said it was in its final stages prior to her suspension.

At issue are allegations of a cover-up in the handling of the Target shooting, with reports being filed on the same day at the same time more than a week after it happened, which prompted NeJame to send letters to state and federal officials calling for an investigation.

Worrell in [an interview with The Daily Beast](#) suggested the probe spans several cases investigated by the Sheriff's Office. She said she feared the investigation would be abandoned by Bain, who was appointed by Gov. Ron DeSantis following her suspension over claims she was not aggressively prosecuting certain crimes.

Bain's office denied that accusation.

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