



ZACH KLEIN

COLUMBUS CITY ATTORNEY

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Contact: Faith Oltman, 614.965.0159

Email: fboltman@columbus.gov

Amid Pandemic, Columbus City Attorney Still Battling Drug Epidemic

Klein files complaints against 11 properties, including largest ever drug-related lawsuit against a single property owner

COLUMBUS — Columbus City Attorney Zach Klein announced today that his office filed complaints against 11 properties, including six owned by the same individual, that were plaguing neighborhoods throughout the city with crime, drugs and violence. The Columbus Division of Police responded to the properties more than 200 times over the last two years for incidents ranging from drug trafficking to gang activity, shootings, prostitution, drug overdoses, stolen vehicles, domestic violence, and hostage situations.

“Normally, we would be announcing that the city closed and boarded up these properties, but we’re still dealing with a number of challenges surrounding the coronavirus pandemic,” said Columbus City Attorney Zach Klein. **“We recognize that shuttering these places will lead to displacing those occupants, but that has to be balanced against the safety and well-being of neighboring families and children who experience these nuisances every day.”**

Properties receiving citations include:

- [73-75 Rodgers Avenue](#)
- [42 South Burgess Avenue](#)
- [Six properties owned by Columbus landlord Benjamin Burden](#)
- [1072 East Weber Road](#)
- [1138 Peters Avenue](#)
- [1127 St. Clair Avenue](#)

Typically, the City Attorney’s office would file one-sided, or *ex parte*, motions in the Franklin County Environmental Court in order to immediately board up these properties. Officers from the Columbus Drug Enforcement Bureau’s Investigative Tactical Unit would then close the properties in a coordinated fashion to enforce the orders. However, given the unparalleled circumstances posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, City Attorney Klein recently filed nuisance abatement cases in Environmental Court. As a result, property owners can expect court hearings to discuss the cases and next steps the week of June 15.

“We can’t give enough credit to Columbus Police, the City of Whitehall and the Franklin County Sheriff’s office for working with us on these cases, especially through these challenging past few months,” said Section Chief Steve Dunbar, who leads the City Attorney’s Zone Initiative. **“We want Columbus residents to know that our law enforcement agencies are there to protect them, and our office will continue to work with all our public safety partners to provide legal support.”**

Details about the properties can be found below:

[73-75 Rodgers Avenue](#)

According to court documents, Columbus police have responded to this Franklinton duplex over 20 times since 2018 on reports of drug dealing, burglary, overdoses, shots fired, gang activity, a dead body, and a theft ring that was stealing from job sites and storing “a large number of washers, dryers, vanity tops, and sinks” at the premises. The city also issued orders in April 2019 for several code violations, which have yet to be remedied by the property owner.

On February 27, 2020, Columbus and Whitehall narcotics detectives executed a search warrant at the premises and seized suspected fentanyl, crack cocaine “from the rafters” of the house, and a “white rock substance.”

On March 10, 2020, officers responded to a report of shots fired after an argument between two males led to one of the men brandishing a gun and firing it several times. The officers found shell casings in the area and upon making entry to the premises, found the suspect in the basement.

[42 South Burgess Avenue](#)

Court records indicate that Columbus police have responded to this Hilltop property over 60 times since 2018 for a variety of runs, including 19 firearm-related incidents, four assaults, domestic violence, and drug dealing.

Patrol officers identified an increased level of gang activity around the premises in September 2019, which also coincided with an increased number of calls for service. The Shot Spotter alert system reported 11 firearm discharges in the area. During most incidents, witnesses pointed to 42 South Burgess as the source of the shootings.

On February 17, 2020, Columbus SWAT officers executed a search warrant. Nineteen individuals were found inside the residence, along with hundreds of heroin needles and other evidence of narcotics activity.

[Six properties owned by Benjamin Burden](#)

Columbus police have responded to properties owned by landlord Benjamin Burden over 100 times since 2018 for a variety of reports, including black-tar heroin, cocaine, and fentanyl trafficking, at least 10 drug overdoses, prostitution, assault, robbery, a victim being held hostage, and an individual being held captive in a cage with no clothing in the front room of a residence. The properties are located at 58 North Wayne Avenue, 230 North Wayne Avenue, 137 South Wheatland Avenue, 385 South Wheatland Avenue, 183 South Burgess Avenue, and 409 Ryan Avenue, which is an eight-unit apartment building located close to an addiction recovery housing complex.

[1072 East Weber Road](#)

Columbus police have responded to this Linden area home multiple times over the past year due to drug dealing, overdoses, and prostitution complaints. According to court documents, the primary tenant of the property is an alleged drug dealer, approximately 60-years-old, who would stand in the front yard and announce that he has “the best dope around.”

On July 6, 2019 officers responded to a call of a drug overdose at the premises and found the tenant’s son unresponsive and not breathing. He was revived and treated at the scene by paramedics and transported in critical condition to Riverside Hospital, where he passed away the following day. The tenant continued selling drugs from the premises—despite his son’s death, as well as an attempt to evict him—and in February and early March of this year, Columbus narcotics detectives conducted undercover purchases of heroin from the premises.

[1138 Peters Avenue](#) and [1127 St. Clair Avenue](#)

Both properties are residential homes in Milo-Grogan that are situated on adjoining parcels separated by an alley—and came to the attention of the Franklin County Sheriff’s special investigative unit in January 2019 due to evidence of narcotics trafficking.

On January 31, 2019, the Sheriff's SWAT team executed a search warrant at 1138 Peters Avenue following purchases of heroin by an undercover detective. The search of the premises revealed approximately 5,449 grams of suspected heroin with a street value of at least \$800,000, two firearms, cellular devices, miscellaneous documents, and cash.

On May 13, 2019, Sheriff's detectives executed another search warrant and seized approximately 846 grams of heroin with a street value of at least \$125,000.

On January 28, 2020, new search warrants were executed at both properties, resulting in two arrests and the seizure of heroin, a "white rock-like substance," two firearms, ammunition, cellular devices, flash drives, SD cards, and miscellaneous documents.

****Editor's note: Copies of the city's complaints are attached here.***

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