

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
COUNTY OF CHARLESTON

James C. (“Chris”) McNeil and
Meaghan Poyer,

Plaintiffs,

v.

SAC 181, LLC,
Meridian Residential Group, LLC,
Adam W. Bayles, individually,
Tara Bayles, individually, and
MRG Investing Company LLC

Defendants.

)
) IN THE COURT OF COMMON
) PLEAS
) NINTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT
)
) Civil Action No. 2025-CP-10-05095
)
) PLAINTIFFS’ BRIEF
) IN ADVANCE OF
) FEBRUARY 9, 2026
) SCHEDULING
) CONFERENCE

FILED

FEB 10 2026

JULIE J. ARMSTRONG
CLERK, C.P. & G.S.

Plaintiffs respectfully submit this brief as a courtesy to the Court in advance of the February 9, 2026 WebEx scheduling conference. This brief addresses

- (I) Plaintiffs' pro se posture and its relevance to how we ended up needing an emergency hearing,
- (II) Documented harms necessitating emergency relief, and
- (III) The transparency, accountability, and safety and relief Plaintiffs seek.

I. PLAINTIFFS' PRO SE POSTURE: STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

A. Alignment With Court and Purpose of Legal Institution

The behavior of defense aligns with research on the negative effects of status bias – research shows established members of a field have reduced performance and default to rigid behaviors when their perceived status difference with an individual is not met with a concurrent lower performance. But Plaintiff Chris McNeil honors the principle of justice and equity at the heart of the legal professional and has intended his unexpected competence level not as an affront but as a service to the Court and to housing justice by a professional whose parallel expertise in systems interventions and strategic communication is relevant to the evidentiary record. McNeil's role is

analogous to an expert witness or non-witness strategic consultant - a comrade to the profession in adjacent fields, not an adversary seeking to replace it.

His goal is to support the Court's alignment with the principles of justice and fairness – especially access to justice to the vulnerable, which is a foundation of the credibility of the court, while contributing technical expertise that would otherwise be unavailable in a case of this complexity.

B. The Unintended Duration

Plaintiffs did not intend to remain pro se through five months of complex litigation involving corporate veil-piercing, falsified postal evidence, retaliatory eviction, 25 or more platform privacy violations, and coordinated obstruction of a South Carolina LLR PMIC investigation. This case met the complexity threshold they had set for a handoff to counsel months ago. However, the very conduct that makes representation necessary - defense counsel's documented pattern of coordinated denial, mischaracterization, and what researchers term institutional betrayal - also raised the standard of due diligence required before Plaintiffs could responsibly entrust this case to a firm.

Plaintiffs have developed and have just begun implementing a rigorous due diligence system designed to identify counsel whose integrity can be verified independently of polished brand presentation. They feel this is a necessary innovation when the firms in this case have demonstrated that professional credentials and institutional reputation do not reliably predict ethical conduct toward vulnerable parties. That process is underway and Plaintiffs reserve the right to retain counsel at any point. Due to the treatment of Mr. McNeil, Plaintiffs are also putting in place redundancy in the lead plaintiff position so a law firm might not be directed by Mr. McNeil but by Ms Poyer or an identified but as yet undisclosed third lead plaintiff in line.

Plaintiffs feel this redundancy with a law firm being lined up initially on standby are necessary to mitigate the defense's apparent attrition strategy. They cannot get rid of the case by getting rid of a person.

C. Additional Perspective: Systems Study from the Vulnerable Tenant's Perspective

Plaintiff McNeil is a systems analyst and strategic communications consultant whose background includes expert witness testimony in internet communication technology. His approach to this litigation is informed in part by his training in the intervention methodology of John Seddon's Vanguard Method - a systems-thinking framework used in the United Kingdom study which redesigns public services by analyzing them from the end-user's point of view. *See* John Seddon, *Freedom from Command and Control* (2003); *see also* John Seddon, *Systems Thinking in the Public Sector* (2008) (documenting how service systems optimized for institutional convenience systematically fail end users).

McNeil has applied this methodology by occupying the role of the unrepresented vulnerable tenant seeking justice—not as simulation, but as lived experience - while simultaneously

documenting the systemic friction points, institutional failures, and coordination patterns that would otherwise remain invisible. This dual perspective - participant *and* analyst - is the methodological core of Seddon's approach: you cannot understand a system's failures from outside the system; you must study demand from the user's point of view. This work is conducted with full respect for and adherence to the South Carolina Rules of Civil Procedure.

II. DOCUMENTED HARMS NECESSITATING EMERGENCY RELIEF

A. Clinical Crisis: PCL-5 Score 76/80 (Severe PTSD Range)

Plaintiff McNeil completed the DSM-5 PTSD Checklist (PCL-5), scoring **76 out of 80**—well into the severe clinical range requiring urgent intervention—and **79/80 on a validated gaslighting-severity instrument**, reflecting extreme coordinated psychological harm. A scheduled telehealth evaluation on February 4, 2026 was cancelled by the provider due to billing-system incompatibilities and a policy against court-related assessments; Plaintiffs are rescheduling through State Health Plan behavioral-health channels. McNeil estimates he is currently operating at approximately 20% of his normal cognitive and functional capacity. This is not ordinary litigation stress. This is a documented medical emergency resulting in harm apparently intentionally caused by attorney conduct.

The term "gaslighting" here is used in its clinical and research sense.

Further, Dr. Jennifer J. Freyd's work provides another relevant term: **institutional betrayal** defined as wrongdoing by institutions upon which individuals depend on - establishes that betrayal by trusted systems produces significantly greater trauma severity and treatment resistance than stranger-perpetrated harm. *See* Smith, C.P. & Freyd, J.J., "Institutional Betrayal," 69 *Am. Psychologist* 575 (2014); Smidt, A.M., Adams-Clark, A.A., & Freyd, J.J., "Institutional Courage Buffers Against Institutional Betrayal, Protects Well-Being," *PLoS ONE* 18(1): e0278830 (2023) (empirically demonstrating that institutional courage attenuates trauma symptoms in betrayal contexts). The same research identifies the **DARVO** response pattern—Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender—as the characteristic institutional reaction to victims who report harm. *See* Freyd, J.J., "Violations of Power, Adaptive Blindness, and Betrayal Trauma Theory," 7 *Feminism & Psychology* 22 (1997).

These concepts describe, with clinical precision, what is documented in this Court's record.

B. The Denial Pattern: Defense Conduct as Institutional Betrayal

For over five months, defense filings have proceeded as though the following documented events did not occur:

- **Retaliatory eviction during a heat wave** (two days at 114° heat index; five nights with no more than two hours sleep on hardwood floors; both Plaintiffs collapsed from

exhaustion; elderly blind service dog removed from an environment configured for his disability)

- **25-platform syndication of private interior images** without knowledge or consent, including images of Plaintiffs and their incontinent dog in diapers—documented in the evidence matrix at rocketsfight.org
- **Falsified USPS postmark document** (metadata confirms September 5, 2025 creation date for document represented as August 28)

These negations of documented reality appear to be part of:

- **Obstruction of SC LLR Investigation No. 2025-566** into PMIC Tara Bayles, including coordinated motions to quash third-party subpoenas filed 42 days before the February 20, 2026 statutory deadline, and witness tampering through direct contact with AppFolio instructing non-compliance

Defense counsel's January 27-28, 2026 emails to this Court continued the DARVO pattern: Mr. O'Brien characterized Plaintiff McNeil's factual notice of Charleston County Sheriff Case No. 2026-001263 as "threats against lawyers" and "mention[ing] our families," when the full text—which counsel declined to attach—contained no threats and referenced families only in the context of encouraging sober reflection about criminal and Bar exposure. Ms. Bolyard joined that characterization. Court staff received these mischaracterizations without visible correction on the record, amplifying the institutional betrayal harm.

Plaintiffs were relieved by the positioning of this conference, which appears to signal that the Court will not simply accept defense counsel's reframing at face value.

C. Updated Discovery Status

- **SAC 181 deposition (February 2, 2026):** SAC 181 was a **no-show** - no appearance
- **LLR Investigator deposition (February 9, 2026):** LLR's counsel informed Plaintiffs that Investigator Kasey Williams will **not appear** and that at least certain aspects of the investigation findings are **sealed**.
- **Effects of the gaslighting strategy on litigation functioning:** Plaintiff McNeil's severe PTSD symptoms impaired his ability to respond in real time to these developments, rewarding the very conduct that caused the harm.

Plaintiffs have responded by channeling available capacity into creating a section on the rocketsfight.org case transparency website that organizes the evidentiary record for the enforcement agencies with jurisdiction - including a publicly accessible, agency-organized evidence matrix beginning with PMIC Tara Bayles, cross-referencing documentary evidence to specific statutes and identifying agencies with primary authority.

The evidence supporting the LLR investigation is already on the public docket; the matrix simply organizes it for efficient review plus the accountability that comes with greater public transparency. It provides the available evidence for a decision that will demonstrate how much

abuse of power over housing for vulnerable tenants is systemically tolerated - a decision that could impact public trust in government oversight over housing in a documented crisis.

D. Coordinated Multi-Firm Conduct

The enforcement matrix documents violations spanning three firms and five defendants across criminal, civil, and regulatory categories—including felony forgery (SC § 16-13-10), false pretenses (SC § 16-13-240), second-degree harassment (SC § 16-3-1700), witness tampering (18 U.S.C. § 1512(b)(3)), and obstruction of the LLR investigation (SC § 40-57-3403). This is not a series of independent misjudgments. It operates to prevent accountability for documented harms while causing escalating psychological injury to the person documenting them.

III. RELIEF SOUGHT: SAFETY AND INSTITUTIONAL COURAGE

This Court possesses **broad inherent authority** to control the conduct of attorneys practicing before it, to manage litigation to prevent abuse, and to protect litigants from harm—including at a scheduling conference and including *sua sponte*. See *Chambers v. NASCO, Inc.*, 501 U.S. 32, 43-46 (1991); *Richardson-Merrell, Inc. v. Koller*, 472 U.S. 424, 433-34 (1985) (recognizing court's inherent supervisory authority over attorneys); SCRPC Rule 16(a)-(b).

A court may disqualify counsel, impose communication protocols, order case management, and sanction attorneys at any stage of proceedings where the integrity of the litigation or the safety of a party is at stake.

A. What Plaintiffs Are NOT Requesting

1. **Plaintiffs are NOT requesting criminal referrals.** Plaintiff McNeil independently initiated Charleston County Sheriff Case No. 2026-001263, and law enforcement will make its own determination.
2. **Plaintiffs are NOT requesting that the Court adjudicate the merits** of this case at a scheduling conference.
3. **Plaintiffs are NOT requesting delay of discovery.** Defense obstruction has *already* caused the delay Plaintiffs sought to prevent, including SAC 181's no-show at its own deposition and the sealing of LLR investigation findings.

B. Safety-Driven Relief: Plaintiff Protection from Ongoing Attorney Harm

Plaintiff McNeil's PCL-5 score of 76/80 is the **measurable clinical consequence** of months of coordinated attorney conduct. He has a wife to protect, health to recover, and a case to preserve. Ordinary protective orders are insufficient when the harm is caused by the attorneys themselves. These are not adversaries engaged in vigorous advocacy - they are actors whose documented conduct pattern is clinically indistinguishable from coordinated psychological assault. Plaintiffs therefore request:

1. Expedited Hearing on Pending Disqualification Cross-Motion (Bolyard / Resnick & Louis)

Plaintiffs' Cross-Motion to Disqualify Counsel for Unconsentable Conflicts of Interest, filed January 14, 2026, remains pending. That motion establishes:[14]

- **Unconsentable conflict under SC RPC 1.7(b)(3):** Bolyard simultaneously represents Meridian (whose indemnity crossclaim against SAC 181 *requires* evidence of commingled operations) and Tara Bayles (whose personal liability defense *requires suppression* of that same evidence)—a logical impossibility that cannot be cured by consent.
- **Facilitation of witness tampering:** On January 9, 2026—one day after filing her Motion to Quash—Meridian directly contacted AppFolio instructing non-compliance with Plaintiffs' subpoena.
- **Obstruction of LLR investigation:** Coordinated quash motions and unilateral delay of Tara Bayles' deposition to February 24—four days *past* the February 20 LLR statutory deadline.

This hearing is a **safety measure**, not merely a procedural one. Removing conflicted counsel who have facilitated witness tampering and coordinated gaslighting is the most direct way to protect Plaintiff McNeil's health.

2. Expedited Hearing on Phelps Dunbar's Conduct

Phelps Dunbar's Motion to Quash was filed **one day after** the SCRPC 45(d)(2)(B) deadline and is waived under *Ex parte Smith*, 407 S.C. 422 (2014). Beyond this procedural defect, the firm's conduct warrants judicial scrutiny:[14]

- Misrepresentation to court staff characterizing a factual criminal-investigation notice as "threats"
- Filing a frivolous AI-authorship sanctions motion
- Coordinated discovery obstruction serving Tara Bayles' interests rather than their own client Charles Altman's interests (the "captured counsel" problem documented in Plaintiffs' January 14 filing)
- Obtaining the December 19, 2025 continuance through misrepresentation of Plaintiff position

Plaintiffs request that the Court set an expedited hearing to address whether Phelps Dunbar's continued participation is compatible with the integrity of these proceedings and the safety of the pro se Plaintiffs.

3. Court-Ordered Case Management with Record-Verified Communication Protocols

If disqualification hearings cannot be set within 14 days, Plaintiffs request—as an immediate safety measure—a **court-appointed case manager or mediator** whose role includes:

- **Routing all counsel-to-Plaintiff communications through a supervised channel** (filed on the docket or directed through the case manager), so that characterizations of Plaintiff communications can be verified against the actual record in real time
- **A prohibition on ex parte or informal characterizations of Plaintiff conduct** to court staff without attaching the full text of the referenced communication
- **Tracking defense counsel communications against the record** to identify and flag further instances of the denial-and-reframing pattern that has caused the documented PTSD crisis

This is the **minimum structural intervention** required to prevent continued psychological harm pending the disqualification hearings.

4. Mandatory Mediation at Defendants' Expense

An order for **mediation within 30 days**, at defendants' expense, conducted by a mediator with experience in landlord-tenant disputes and power-imbalanced litigation. The defense has demonstrated no willingness to engage on the merits; a court-ordered process may create the conditions for resolution that voluntary negotiation has not.

5. Interim Seven-Day Health-Based Protective Window (Rule 26(c), SCRCF)

The narrow no-contact relief previously requested—restricting non-essential adversarial communications for seven days—remains necessary to allow Plaintiff McNeil to complete the mental health evaluation that the February 4 provider was unable to conduct.

6. ADA Accommodations (Title II, 42 U.S.C. § 12132)

- **Primary:** E-filing access for disabled Plaintiff McNeil and joint use by co-Plaintiff Poyer, consistent with the access already afforded represented litigants
- **Secondary:** If e-filing cannot be implemented immediately, an interim order treating signed PDFs emailed to the Clerk as "filed upon receipt" and timestamped on transmission
- **Remote appearance** for all non-evidentiary hearings via WebEx/Zoom, without requiring opposing counsel consent

C. Institutional Courage: What the Court's Response Signals

Dr. Freyd's research identifies **Institutional Courage** as the evidence-based antidote to institutional betrayal—the response that heals rather than compounds trust injuries. *See* Smidt, Adams-Clark, & Freyd, *PLoS ONE* 18(1): e0278830 (2023); Freyd, J.J., "Institutional Courage," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica: Advocacy for Social Change* (2018). Its three components apply directly to this Court's authority:

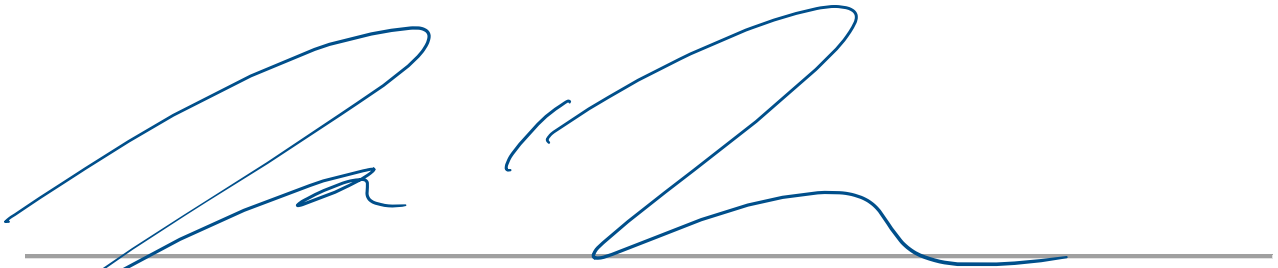
1. **Transparency:** Naming defense conduct accurately—recognizing that characterizing a factual criminal-investigation notice as "threats to lawyers and their families" is misrepresentation to the Court, not legitimate advocacy

2. **Accountability:** Setting disqualification hearings that mark this conduct as the high-end outlier it is, not the professional norm—thereby protecting the reputation of the bar itself.
 3. **Whistleblower protection:** Shielding the party who documented systemic flaws—falsified evidence, regulatory obstruction, coordinated psychological harm—from retaliation through procedural warfare, rather than allowing the documentation of wrongdoing to be reframed as the wrongdoing itself
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IV. REQUESTED CONFERENCE OUTCOMES

1. **Expedited hearing dates** (within 14 days) for (a) Plaintiffs' pending Cross-Motion to Disqualify Bolyard/Resnick & Louis, and (b) a show-cause hearing on Phelps Dunbar's continued participation
2. **Immediate appointment of a case manager** to supervise defense communications and verify them against the record, pending the disqualification hearing
3. **Interim ADA accommodations** effective immediately: e-filing access (primary) or email-as-filed (secondary); remote appearance authorization
4. **Seven-day health-based protective window** restricting non-essential adversarial contact
5. **Mandatory mediation** within 30 days, at defendants' expense
6. **Clarification of judicial assignment** through whatever process this Court and the Chief Judge for Administrative Purposes consider appropriate, prioritizing judicial efficiency and familiarity with the record

Respectfully submitted this 9th day of February, 2026.



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