

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
EASTERN DISTRICT OF KENTUCKY, LONDON**

The Estate of TODD ST. JOHN, ex.	)	
rel. Personal Representative,	)	
MACKENZIE EADS,	)	Case No. 6:26-CV-130-CHB
	)	
Plaintiff,	)	
	)	
v.	)	
	)	
KNOX COUNTY, Knox County	)	JURY TRIAL DEMANDED
Sheriff's Department Officer in his	)	
Individual Capacity, JOHN MICHAEL	)	
"MIKEY" ASHURST, Knox County	)	
Sheriff MIKE SMITH, in his Individual	)	
Capacity,	)	
	)	
Defendants.	)	

**COMPLAINT**

NOW COMES Plaintiff, THE ESTATE OF TODD ST. JOHN, by his personal representative, MACKENZIE EADS, and complains of Defendants KNOX COUNTY, JOHN MICHAEL "MIKEY" ASHURST, and MIKE SMITH as follows:

**Introduction**

1. Defendant Mikey Ashurst murdered twenty-one-year-old Todd St. John.
2. He did so without any legal justification.
3. Todd was not the first Knox County citizen killed by Defendant Ashurst.
4. Rather than follow proper police protocols, Defendant Ashurst turned his police cruiser into a deadly weapon.

5. On July 24, 2025, Todd was driving a side-by-side utility task vehicle (“UTV”) with his best friend, twenty-year-old Jerry Stewart, in the bucket seat next to him.

6. Defendant Ashurst killed Todd by ramming Todd’s UTV with his cruiser and running him off the road.

7. Defendant Ashurst’s illegal actions followed his long history of abusive, excessive, deadly misconduct as a law-enforcement officer.

8. Defendants Knox County and Sheriff Mike Smith were aware of Defendant Ashurst’s prior illegal actions when they hired him.

9. Because of the failures of Defendants Sheriff Smith and Knox County to properly hire, train, or supervise Defendant Ashurst, the world is without Todd St. John.

10. Defendant Ashurst ripped Todd’s life from those who loved him, including fiancée Mackenzie Eads and their two young children.

11. Instead of planning their wedding and the rest of their life together, Mackenzie was left to plan Todd’s funeral.

12. Todd was a Corbin City employee and provider for his family.

13. Defendant Ashurst’s actions left Mackenzie alone to raise her and Todd’s two children.

14. Now, Mackenzie and their two young children must cope with the loss of their beloved husband-to-be and father.

15. This lawsuit seeks justice to hold those responsible for the violation of constitutional rights, not only for Todd St. John, but those who have been irreparably harmed by Defendants' misconduct.

### **Jurisdiction and Venue**

16. This action is brought pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983 to redress the deprivation under color of law of Plaintiff's rights as secured by the U.S. Constitution.

17. This Court has jurisdiction pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1331 and § 1367.

18. Venue is proper under 28 U.S.C. § 1391(b) and (c). On information and belief, all parties reside in this judicial district, and the events giving rise to the claims asserted herein all occurred within this district.

### **The Parties**

19. Plaintiff, the Estate of Todd St. John, constitutes the legal interests of Todd St. John, and has a Personal Representative, Mackenzie Eads, the fiancée of Todd St. John and the mother of his two young children.

20. Mackenzie Eads was appointed the Administrator of the Estate of Todd St. John in Knox County District Court, Case No. 25-P-199, by Order entered on August 4, 2025. A true and correct copy of her Order of Appointment is attached hereto as Exhibit 1.

21. At all relevant times, Defendant Mikey Ashurst was an officer with the Knox County Sheriff's Department. Defendant Ashurst is sued in his individual

capacity and acted under color of law and within the scope of his employment in engaging in the actions alleged in this complaint.

22. At all relevant times, Defendant Mike Smith was the Knox County Sheriff and participated in Defendant Ashurst's hiring decision. Defendant Smith is sued in his individual capacity and acted under color of law and within the scope of his employment in engaging in the actions alleged in this complaint.

23. Defendant Knox County is a local governmental entity organized under Kentucky law. Defendant Knox County is responsible for the policies, practices, and customs of the Knox County Sheriff's Department.

## **FACTUAL ALLEGATIONS**

### **Defendant Ashurst Killed Todd St. John, Without Justification**

24. On July 24, 2025, at around 7:30 pm, Jerry Stewart went to Todd St. John's home to hang out.

25. Todd had bought a side-by-side vehicle two days prior.

26. A side-by-side is a recreational, utility task vehicle popular for outdoor activities and commonly owned by residents in rural Knox County.

27. As far back as 2009, the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission ("CPSC") has warned of safety concerns with side-by-sides during crashes.

28. As many do in Knox County, Todd was planning to ride his side-by-side on the backroads and trails near his property.

29. At around 8:00 pm, Jerry, his wife and children, Todd, Mackenzie, their children, and Todd's aunt and uncle all went to a nearby restaurant for dinner.

30. At the restaurant, Todd shared a small pitcher of beer with his uncle, who joined them for dinner.

31. Todd and Jerry left the restaurant and returned to Todd's home.

32. At around 9:15 pm, Todd and Jerry went to a local convenient store to get gasoline in the side-by-side.

33. The store is less than two miles from Todd's home.

34. After leaving the gas station, Todd drove the UTV toward a trail in a field near Todd's property.

35. The field was just 5-10 seconds away from the location where Defendant Ashurst killed Todd.

36. While Todd and Jerry were riding in the side-by-side on the main road, just before the turning lane onto SE Business Drive, Jerry noticed a police cruiser pull up behind them with its lights on.

37. Defendant Knox County Sheriff's Deputy Mikey Ashurst was on duty and driving the Dodge Charger police cruiser.

38. At the time Defendant Ashurst decided to initiate the traffic stop and pursue the UTV, Defendant Ashurst was not investigating a serious crime, and Todd and Jerry posed no safety threat.

39. Defendant Ashurst is familiar with side-by-side recreational vehicles, which are common in Knox County.

40. Defendant Ashurst knew that the UTV was less safe and no match for his cruiser, which had additional safety features.

41. Upon information and belief, Defendant Ashurst utilized personal funds to purchase and install the pit bumper on his cruiser, which he did in order to carry out his duties as a Knox County Deputy, and which he used to pit maneuver the UTV.

42. A side-by-side is an open-air vehicle with a smaller frame than a car, with a higher center of gravity, a smaller wheelbase, and an inherent risk of rollovers, ejections, and, most importantly, catastrophic injuries.

43. For these reasons, known to Defendant Ashurst, his decision to engage in a high-speed pursuit and to intentionally ram the UTV was both illegal and fatal.

44. Knowing he had no just cause to engage in a pursuit, Defendant Ashurst did not call in the alleged traffic stop or pursuit to dispatch.

45. Dispatch was not notified until after the collision.

46. Defendant Ashurst acknowledged to a Kentucky State Police Detective investigating the collision that he did not believe Todd saw him when Ashurst began his pursuit.

47. In the 20-30 seconds from when Defendant Ashurst pulled up behind the side-by-side, Todd did not slow down.

48. In less than 30 seconds upon encountering the UTV, Defendant Ashurst rammed his cruiser into the side-by-side, causing it to overturn with Todd and Jerry inside.

49. Defendant Ashurst used his deadly police cruiser to take the life of a 21-year-old father of two and to place Jerry's life in imminent danger.

50. Secured in the safety of his cruiser, Defendant Ashurst was not injured in the collision.

51. Defendant Ashurst improperly engaged in a high-speed pursuit of the side-by-side despite the circumstances clearly demonstrating it was not safe to do so.

52. Rather than follow proper protocols, Defendant Ashurst rammed his police vehicle into the side-by-side without legal justification.

53. The Kentucky State Police Detective investigating the collision noted Defendant Ashurst failed to keep the proper lane, followed Todd too close, and improperly passed the UTV.

54. Although Jerry suffered only minor contusions, the mental trauma caused to Jerry by Defendant Ashurst's illegal actions will last Jerry's lifetime.

55. Jerry recalls the driver's side of the side-by-side hitting the ground first.

56. Because of the open-air nature of the side-by-side, Todd's head and a portion of his body landed outside on the ground, while the rest of his body was still inside.

57. Todd tragically suffered catastrophic injuries, leaving a blood-soaked area on the pavement where his body came to rest.

58. Todd was pronounced dead at Baptist Health Hospital at 10:23 pm.

59. The following photo was taken on July 25, 2025, several hours after the crash, and depicts the side-by-side driven by Todd in the foreground – after it had been flipped back upright - and the police cruiser driven by Defendant Ashurst in the background.



60. The following photo depicts Defendant Ashurst's police cruiser, equipped with impact bars around the bumper and other enhancement features to protect against impact.



61. Defendant Ashurst’s intentional and/or reckless deadly use of his police cruiser caused the crash that killed Todd.

**Defendants Knox County and Sheriff Smith Were Well Aware of Defendant Ashurst’s History of Egregious Misconduct Before Hiring Him in 2024**

62. Defendant Ashurst is a dangerous law-enforcement officer with a history of committing unjustified violence toward citizens.

63. Defendants Knox County and Sheriff Smith were aware of Defendant Ashurst’s propensity for violence before again hiring him at the Knox County Sheriff’s Office in August 2024 and before he killed Todd in July 2025.

64. In 2016, Defendant Ashurst—then a Knox County Sheriff’s Deputy under Defendant Sheriff Smith’s command —intentionally murdered Jessie J. Mills.

65. Defendant Ashurst, along with another law enforcement officer, beat an unarmed Mr. Mills until he lay bloodied and unresponsive on the ground.

66. After Mr. Mills was finally able to get up, as he was stumbling forward, Defendant Ashurst shot Mr. Mills in the abdomen.

67. Defendant Ashurst committed this act of cold, calculated violence just six feet away from Mr. Mills.

68. After this first gunshot, Defendant Ashurst fired a second and fatal shot into Mills' chest.

69. During the investigation into Defendant Ashurst's killing of Mr. Mills, investigators admitted that their only goal was to prove that Mr. Mills resisted officers.

70. The Administrator of Mr. Mills' Estate filed a civil suit as a result of Defendant Ashurst's unconstitutional conduct, naming Ashurst and Knox County, among others, as Defendants.

71. In July of 2019, Defendant Sheriff Smith was deposed in that civil suit.

72. Defendant Sheriff Smith was the Knox County Sheriff and Defendant Ashurst's employer at the time Defendant Ashurst shot and killed Mr. Mills.

73. During the 2019 deposition, Sheriff Smith was questioned about Defendant Ashurst's employment history.

74. Sheriff Smith acknowledged during the deposition that he was aware prior to hiring Defendant Ashurst in 2015, Defendant Ashurst had twice applied to the Kentucky State Police.

75. Sheriff Smith admitted he knew that Defendant Ashurst had twice been denied employment with KSP after KSP conducted a background investigation of Defendant Ashurst.

76. Sheriff Smith also admitted that he was aware that prior to hiring Defendant Ashurst in 2015 that Ashurst was forced to leave the employment of the Laurel County Sheriff's Office after having an extramarital affair with the then-Sheriff's daughter.

77. During the deposition, Sheriff Smith acknowledged that when Defendant Ashurst was previously employed at the Danville Police Department, his supervisor noted that Ashurst displayed a hostile attitude towards the public and wanted Defendant Ashurst to use a less aggressive approach to resolve conflicts with members of the public.

78. Sheriff Smith was also questioned about Defendant Ashurst's previous employer at the Harlan County Sheriff's Office, noting he would not recommend Ashurst for rehire due to the multiple citizen complaints that were made against Ashurst due to his attitude and behavior.

79. During the 2019 deposition, Sheriff Smith was questioned about a photo Defendant Ashurst posted on his social media account of a man pointing a gun at another man's head with the caption, "Train to Win."

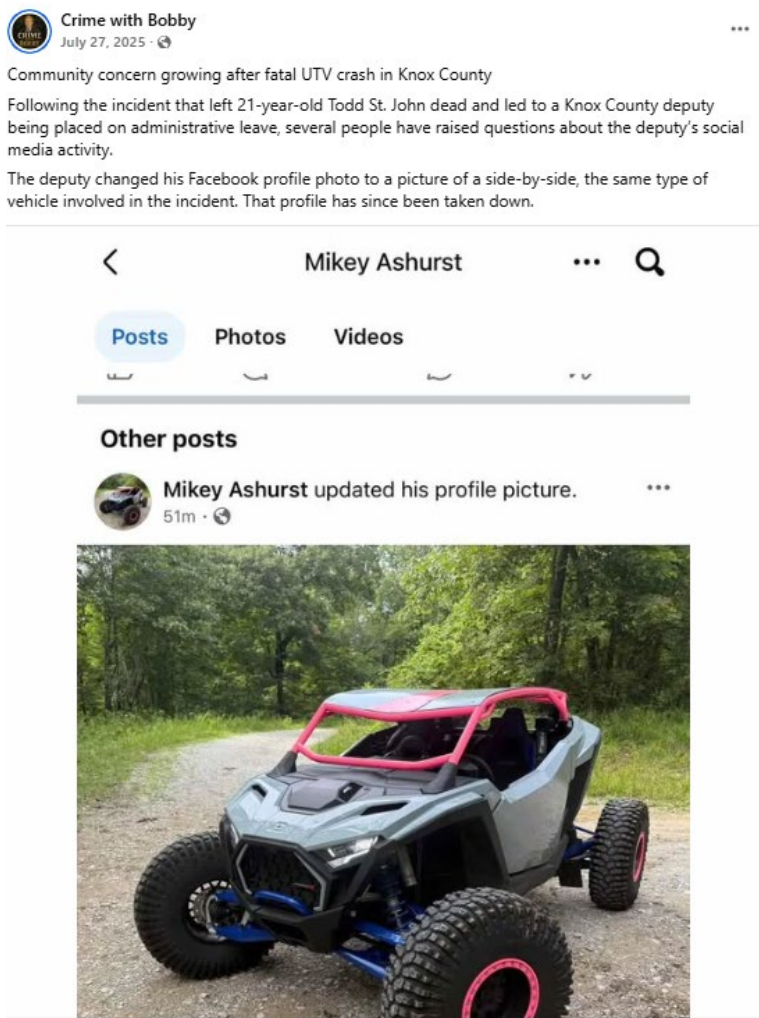
80. Sheriff Smith was also questioned about another photo Defendant Ashurst posted on his social media account of an officer tasing an individual with the caption, "Taser. From Badass to p\*\*\*y in .5 seconds."

81. Upon information and belief, Defendants Knox County and Smith were also aware, or should have been aware, that in 2022, Defendant Ashurst was fired as Chief of the Livingston Police Department after engaging in physically threatening and aggressive behavior toward an incoming mayor at a City Council meeting.

**Defendant Ashurst Flaunted His Killing of Todd on Social Media**

82. Defendant Ashurst does not shy away from his violent reputation. In fact, just days after he intentionally pit maneuvered Todd's side-by-side, killing a father of two young children, Defendant Ashurst changed his Facebook profile picture to an image of a side-by-side vehicle.

83. The following screenshot shows Defendant Ashurst's profile picture, updated after the collision.



84. Defendant Ashurst’s public nod to a side-by-side vehicle, like the one driven by Todd just hours before, not only demonstrates Defendant Ashurst’s familiarity with side-by-side vehicles, but his total lack of remorse for his actions.

85. Defendant Ashurst engaged in the misconduct described above in part because he believes he is untouchable in Knox County.

### **Plaintiff’s Damages**

86. Defendants’ actions imposed substantial harm upon Todd St. John before and after Defendant Ashurst killed him.

87. The level of agonizing pain Todd St. John felt during his final moments is unquantifiable.

88. Todd St. John lost the opportunity to live the rest of his life, to marry his beloved fiancée, and to raise his two young children. These damages are tragic and substantial.

89. Todd's family suffers financially, emotionally, psychologically, and physically from the loss of their beloved father and husband-to-be.

90. At the time of Todd's death, he and Mackenzie's babies were just four and two years old.

91. Now, Mackenzie must find a way to answer her young daughter when she asks where her Daddy is.

92. Mackenzie is left to celebrate their children's birthdays without Todd.

93. Todd was also the primary provider for the family. Without his income, Mackenzie has to provide for their children alone.

94. Mackenzie and their children experience every moment, big and small, feeling the excruciating loss of Todd St. John.

**Count I - 42 U.S.C. § 1983  
Fourth Amendment – Excessive Force  
Defendant Ashurst**

95. Each of the Paragraphs in this Complaint is incorporated as if restated fully herein.

96. As described in the preceding paragraphs, the conduct of Defendant Ashurst toward Todd St. John constitutes excessive force in violation of the Fourth Amendment of the United States Constitution.

97. The misconduct described in this Count was objectively unreasonable and undertaken with willfulness and reckless indifference to the rights of others.

98. As a result of the misconduct described in this Count, Plaintiff suffered injuries, as more fully alleged above.

99. This Count is brought by the Estate of Todd St. John, by personal representative Mackenzie Eads.

**Count II - 42 U.S.C. § 1983**  
***Monell* Claim Against Defendant Knox County**

100. Each of the Paragraphs in this Complaint is incorporated as if restated fully herein.

101. The misconduct described in this Complaint was undertaken pursuant to the policies and practices of the Knox County Sheriff's Department, described above, which were ratified by policymakers for the Knox County Government with final policymaking authority.

102. As such, Defendant Knox County is also liable, in that:

- a. As a matter of both policy and practice, Knox County encourages, and is thereby the moving force behind, the very type of misconduct at issue here by failing to adequately train, supervise, control, and discipline its officers such that its failure to do so manifests deliberate indifference;

- b. As a matter of both policy and practice, Knox County facilitates the very type of misconduct at issue here by failing to adequately investigate, punish, and discipline prior instances of similar misconduct, thereby leading Knox County officers and constables to believe their actions will never be meaningfully scrutinized and, in that way, directly encouraging future uses of excessive deadly force such as those Plaintiff complains of;
- c. Generally, as a matter of widespread practice so prevalent as to comprise municipal policy, officers of the Knox County Sheriff's Department abuse citizens in a manner similar to that alleged by Mr. St. John in this Court on a regular basis, yet the Knox County Sheriff's Department investigates officer misconduct and makes findings of wrongdoing in a disproportionately small number of cases;
- d. The Knox County Sheriff's Department's failure to meaningfully investigate police misconduct and to control its officers is further illustrated by its handling of Defendant Ashurst's misconduct and lack of discipline for the misconduct.
- e. In fact, the Knox County Sheriff's Department encouraged Ashurst's conduct by previously rewarding him with commendations for aggressive police tactics.

103. As a result of the Knox County's policies and practices, and the unjustified and unreasonable conduct of Defendant Ashurst, Plaintiff has suffered injuries, including death and severe emotional distress.

104. The policies and practices described in this Count were maintained and implemented by the Knox County Government with deliberate indifference to Plaintiffs' constitutional rights.

105. As a direct and proximate result of the Knox County Governments' actions, Plaintiff's constitutional rights were violated and he suffered injuries and damages, as set forth in this Complaint.

106. The Knox County Government is therefore liable for the misconduct committed by its officers.

107. As a result of the misconduct described in this Count, Plaintiff suffered injuries, as more fully alleged above.

108. This Count is brought by the Estate of Todd St. John, by personal representative Mackenzie Eads, and by Mackenzie Eads on her own behalf.

**Count III - 42 U.S.C. § 1983  
Negligent Supervision and Training  
Defendants Smith and Knox County**

109. Each of the Paragraphs in this Complaint is incorporated as if restated fully herein.

110. In committing the acts alleged in the preceding paragraphs, Defendant Ashurst was a member of, and an agent of, the Knox County Sheriff's Department, acting at all relevant times within the scope of his employment.

111. At all times relevant, Defendant Mike Smith was the Knox County Sheriff and had a duty to properly train and supervise in relation to the tasks law enforcement officers must perform pursuant to the policies at the Knox County Sheriff's Department.

112. At all times relevant to the allegations in this Complaint, Defendant Knox County had a duty to properly train and supervise in relation to the tasks law enforcement officers must perform pursuant to the policies, practices, and customs of the Knox County Sheriff's Department.

113. The training and supervision of Defendant Ashurst, as performed by Defendant Smith and Defendant Knox County, was inadequate for the tasks Defendant Ashurst was required to perform.

114. The inadequate training and supervision by Defendant Smith and Defendant Knox County were the result of deliberate indifference.

115. The inadequate training and supervision by Defendant Smith and Defendant Knox County were closely related to or actually caused Plaintiff's injury.

116. As a result of the misconduct described in this Count, Plaintiff suffered injuries, as more fully alleged above.

117. This Count is brought by the Estate of Todd St. John, by personal representative Mackenzie Eads, and by Mackenzie Eads on her own behalf.

**Count III – Wrongful Death  
All Defendants**

118. Each of the Paragraphs in this Complaint is incorporated as if restated fully herein.

119. In the manner more fully described above, the Defendants negligently, recklessly, willfully, and unjustifiably caused the death of Todd St. John. Todd, therefore, had a valid claim for damages against the Defendants at the time of his death.

120. Consequently, Plaintiff, Todd's fiancé, Mackenzie, and their children, have suffered, and will continue to suffer, significant emotional distress and harm, including but not limited to the loss of companionship with Todd, as well as the opportunity to live as a family together.

121. The misconduct described in this Count was intentional and undertaken with malice, willfulness, and reckless indifference to the rights of others.

122. This Count is brought by the Estate of Todd St. John, by personal representative Mackenzie Eads, and by Mackenzie Eads on her own behalf.

**Count IV – State-Law Negligent Hiring  
Defendants Smith & Knox County**

123. Each of the Paragraphs in this Complaint is incorporated as if restated fully herein.

124. Defendants Smith and Knox County were negligent in hiring Defendant Ashurst as an employee of the Knox County Sheriff's Department.

125. By the time that Defendant Ashurst was employed by the Knox County Sheriff's Department, Defendants Smith and Knox County knew, or reasonably should have known, that Defendant Ashurst was unfit for the job for which he was hired.

126. By the time of Defendant Ashurst's hire in 2024, Defendants Smith and Knox County knew, or reasonably should have known, that Defendant Ashurst had a documented history of misconduct as a law enforcement officer, including unjustified violence against citizens.

127. On information and belief, by the time of Defendant Ashurst's hire in 2024, Defendants Smith and Knox County knew, or reasonably should have known, that Defendant Ashurst had lied on his employment application regarding his fitness to be a law-enforcement officer.

128. On information and belief, by the time of Defendant Ashurst's hire in 2024, and as far back as 2015, Defendants Smith and Knox County knew, or reasonably should have known, that Defendant Ashurst had twice applied to the Kentucky State Police and been denied employment following his background investigation.

129. By the time of Defendant Ashurst's hire in 2024, and as far back as 2015, Defendants Smith and Knox County knew, or reasonably should have known, that Defendant Ashurst was forced to leave the employment of the Laurel County Sheriff's Office after having an extramarital affair with the then-Sheriff's daughter.

130. By the time of Defendant Ashurst's hire in 2024, and as far back as 2015, Defendants Smith and Knox County knew, or reasonably should have known, that during Defendant Ashurst's previous employment at the Danville Police Department, Ashurst's supervisor noted that Ashurst displayed a hostile attitude

towards the public and wanted Defendant Ashurst to use a less aggressive approach to resolve conflicts with members of the public.

131. By the time of Defendant Ashurst's hire in 2024, and as far back as 2015, Defendants Smith and Knox County knew, or reasonably should have known, that Defendant Ashurst's previous employer at the Harlan County Sheriff's Office, noted he would not recommend Ashurst for rehire due to the multiple citizen complaints that were made against Defendant Ashurst due to his attitude and behavior.

132. By the time of Defendant Ashurst's hire in 2024, Defendants Knox County and Smith knew, or should have known, that in 2023, Defendant Ashurst resigned as Chief of the Livingston Police Department after engaging in physically threatening and aggressive behavior toward an incoming mayor at a City Council meeting.

133. Despite the above, Defendants Smith and Knox County recommended, enabled and/or authorized Defendant Ashurst's hiring at the Knox County Sheriff's Department.

134. Defendant Smith's hiring of Defendant Ashurst in 2024 created an unreasonable risk of harm to Plaintiff and others in the Commonwealth.

135. Less than a year after being hired by Defendant Smith as a Knox County Deputy, Defendant Ashurst unjustifiably killed Todd St. John.

136. As a result of the misconduct described in this Count, Plaintiff suffered injuries, as more fully alleged above.

137. This Count is brought by the Estate of Todd St. John, by personal representative Mackenzie Eads, and by Mackenzie Eads on her own behalf.

**Count V**  
***Respondent Superior***  
**Defendant Knox County**

138. Each of the Paragraphs in this Complaint is incorporated as if restated fully herein.

139. In committing the acts alleged in the preceding paragraphs, Defendant Ashurst was a member and agent of the Knox County Sheriff's Department, acting at all relevant times within the scope of his employment.

140. Defendant Knox County is liable as principal for all state law torts committed by its agents.

WHEREFORE, Plaintiff respectfully requests that this Court enter judgment in his favor and against Defendants, KNOX COUNTY, JOHN MICHAEL "MIKEY" ASHURST, and MIKE SMITH, and, award compensatory damages and attorneys' fees, as well as punitive damages against JOHN MICHAEL "MIKEY" ASHURST and MIKE SMITH, and any other relief this Court deems just and appropriate.

**JURY DEMAND**

Plaintiff, THE ESTATE OF TODD ST. JOHN, hereby demands a trial by jury pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 38(b) on all issues so triable.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/ Amy Robinson Staples  
*One of Plaintiff's Attorneys*

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*\*Pro Hac Vice Motion Forthcoming*