

## Verizon Will Pay \$125M To Atty Paralyzed By Fallen Pole

By Jeannie O'Sullivan

Law360 (May 6, 2020, 4:23 PM EDT) -- Verizon New Jersey Inc. will pay \$125 million to resolve claims by an attorney who was catastrophically injured after a rotted utility pole fell and hit her, in what her attorney said Wednesday is the largest personal injury settlement awarded to an individual in the Garden State.



Verizon has reached a \$125 million settlement with Maria Meister, a former Milberg Factors general counsel and onetime Simpson Thacher associate who suffered catastrophic injuries when a utility pole fell on her in 2017. (AP)

Maria Meister, now 50, was headed to her job as general counsel for Milberg Factors Inc. when the pole fell on her, leaving her with a traumatic brain injury and paralyzed in three limbs. Superior Court Judge Stephen L. Petrillo signed the settlement order Monday.

"You don't get paid these types of numbers without tragedy, and that's what we have here," Meister's attorney David A. Mazie of Mazie Slater Katz & Freeman LLC told Law360.

A mother of two who was an avid hiker, Meister is permanently disabled and will never work again, according to Mazie. In addition to paralysis, Meister grapples with cognitive deficits due to what Mazie said was a "rare combination" of a spinal injury and a brain injury.

Meister was previously an associate at Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP, according to Mazie.

Verizon spokesman Richard Young told Law360 in a statement: "Words cannot adequately express the remorse, sympathy and compassion that we have for Maria Meister and her family. Maria, her husband and children have been constantly on our minds since this happened and will continue to be in the years to come."

"While no amount of compensation can make up for what was lost, we hope the resolution of this case helps bring some measure of comfort and provides care for Maria and her family, now and in the future," Verizon said.

The settlement breaks down into \$118.3 million for Meister and \$7 million for her husband, Peter, who filed a loss of consortium claim in the June 2017 lawsuit. Two other defendants — Public Service Electric & Gas, which formerly co-owned the pole, and cable company Neptune Holding US Corp. — will pay \$250,000 and \$25,000, respectively.

Mazie Slater was awarded an attorney fee of 20% of the settlement proceeds above \$3 million. The award will be held in escrow until a lien filed by the Meisters' former firm, Kirsch Gelband & Stone PA, is resolved, according to the settlement order.

The Jan. 23, 2017, accident happened while Meister was commuting to her job in New York City, according to court documents. While she waited at a Union City bus stop, the utility pole snapped and crushed her head and body, court documents state.

The 43-year-old pole was jointly owned by Verizon and PSE&G at the time, according to court documents. PSE&G had ordered Verizon to remove the pole in 1999, but it was never removed, court documents state.

Representatives for PSE&G and Neptune Holding didn't immediately respond to requests for comment Wednesday.

The Meisters are represented by David A. Mazie, David Freeman, David Estes and Adam Epstein of Mazie Slater Katz & Freeman LLC.

Verizon is represented by Thomas M. Crino of Goldberg Segalla.

Neptune is represented by Alfredo Javier Alvarado of Lester Schwab Katz & Dwyer.

PSE&G is represented in-house by Robert Sanchez.

The case is Maria Meister et al. v. Verizon New Jersey Inc. et al., case number L-004738-17, in the Superior Court of the State of New Jersey, County of Essex.

--Editing by Janice Carter Brown.