

PHILADELPHIA (CBS) — Monday, the Criminal Justice Center (CJC) reopened after an elevator malfunction last week sent a Sheriff's Deputy with serious injuries.

48-year-old Sergeant Paul Owens remains in critical condition. Investigators say the elevator he was in last Thursday shot upwards, crashing through the building's top level.

"He's still in an induced coma because the swelling that's surrounded his brain has not gone down," said trial attorney Michael Tinari, who is representing Owens and his family.

Tinari said Owens may never walk again.

"The diagnosis is that he has paralysis and that's due to the broken back," he explained.

Tinari says Owen's wife, Heather James is in disbelief over a frightening coincidence. She was injured in an elevator incident in the same building when she worked there back in 2009.

Heather was also a sheriff with the City of Philadelphia's Sheriff department and unfortunately she was injured in the CJC in a restricted use elevator such as the one that was used by Paul," explained Tinari.

"As she was escorting prisoners off the restricted use elevator onto the landing, the elevator dropped and she tripped and fractured her ankle, which required surgery," he continued.

Tinari says because of that injury, James had to leave her job. Now, she is dealing with what will happen to her husband.

"It's very difficult for Heather to talk about it. I think she's remaining strong and I think she has faith, but she's taking it one day at a time," said Tinari.

CBS3 spoke with three current employees as they left the CJC Monday afternoon. All three say both the staff and public elevator systems in the CJC have been plagued with problems for years.

"Are you now using the stairs?" asked reporter Greg Argos

"Oh absolutely. Yeah. Without a doubt, and I hate walking," responded Jessie Foglietta, who works in the records department.

"Yes, and I'll probably be using the stairs for quite some time," said Shaneed Smith, a court clerk when asked the same question.

Both Foglietta and Smith say they've experienced issues while using the elevator system in the building.

"The elevator pretty much stopped and I couldn't get out," recalled Foglietta.

"We were in panic mode for a minute," she continued, recalling the experience as the elevator doors would not open.

"[There have been] elevators stalling. [There have been] the doors not closing completely. The elevator [has jolted] a little bit with the doors close. You can feel like a little jolt," said Smith.

CBS3 reached out to the state-run Department of Labor and Industry, which is the organization responsible for ensuring elevators in Pennsylvania are operating correctly. Employees there also keep track of any elevator incident which resulted in injury death or damage. A spokesperson would not release the number of elevators incidents at the CJC citing the investigation. The City of Philadelphia operates the building. A spokesperson at the Mayor's office said the city does keep track of all accidents involving elevators but would not at this time provide details about incidents at the CJC.