

# Los Angeles Times

## False sex abuse claim filed ‘without consent’ in L.A.’s \$4-billion settlement, man says



Melvin Dunlap stands in front of the former offices of Downtown LA Law Group on March 15, 2026. (Ronaldo Bolanos / Los Angeles Times)

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- Melvin Dunlap, a Missouri native, said he was pressured to sign documents opting into L.A. County’s \$4-billion sex abuse settlement.
- Downtown LA Law Group denied wrongdoing and said in a statement: “No one in the firm to our knowledge has coerced its clients or anyone else to sign anything.”
- Dunlap’s account deepens questions around how the firm acquired sex abuse plaintiffs — and whether some may be unknowing participants.

Melvin Dunlap says he doesn't know how he became a plaintiff in the nation's largest sex abuse settlement.

He grew up in Missouri, halfway across the country from L.A. County's juvenile halls — the subject of a deluge of lawsuits from people who say they were sexually assaulted while detained as children.

Dunlap says he has never been to juvie, and he's never been abused.

And yet he's part of L.A. County's \$4-billion sex abuse settlement, identified in court filings as JOHN DOE M.D. His lawsuit claims he was "physically assaulted, sexually harassed and abused" by staff at a Los Angeles detention center in Boyle Heights when he was 15.

"I can put my hand on a Bible and say 'I ain't ever been abused sexually,'" said Dunlap, who provided text messages and emails showing he sought to report the matter to the State Bar for investigation last July.

Dunlap's lawsuit was filed Oct. 15, 2024, by Downtown LA Law Group. The firm, also known as DTLA, is under investigation by the district attorney, State Bar, and the county after nine clients told The Times last year they were paid to file sex abuse claims, some of which were fraudulent. DTLA has asked for at least three of the lawsuits to be dismissed.

The firm has denied all wrongdoing and maintained its lawyers "operate with unwavering integrity, prioritizing client welfare." The firm said through a spokesperson that DTLA rejects most cases that filter through its office and could not discuss specific clients due to "the constraints of attorney client privilege."

"Having said that, no one in the firm to our knowledge has coerced its clients or anyone else to sign anything," DTLA said in a statement.

The Times confirmed Dunlap had a lawsuit filed by DTLA through records that detail the firm's clients in the L.A. County settlement. Like most sexual abuse cases, all of DTLA's lawsuits were filed using only the plaintiff's initials.

Dunlap, a 30-year-old fashion stylist, says he wanted to report the firm, but wasn't sure how. On July 28, 2025, Dunlap sent an email to a law firm he found online, saying he wanted representation against DTLA and help filing a State Bar complaint about "an attempt to include me in a class action settlement without consent."

"I was told I needed to sign settlement paperwork for a case supposedly tied to a juvenile claim. I made it clear multiple times that I had no memory of this case, did not authorize representation, and stated firmly: 'I don't want to be part of this — take me off the case,'" he wrote in the email.

"Despite this, I was told I could not leave because 'it's more complicated than that.'"

Dunlap said he never moved forward with trying to file a case against DTLA.

Dunlap has brought a few cases to DTLA over the last five years. Court records show the firm represented him in 2021 after, he says, he slipped in a trail of mop water at a hotel during a trip to visit his uncle. He got about \$1,700 for that one, he says. He called the firm again after moving to L.A. last year after a driver ran over his foot.

In July 2025, he says, the firm called him and asked him to come to its downtown office on Broadway to discuss his case. He assumed there had been progress suing the driver over his foot injury.

Instead, he said, he was shepherded into a glass office where a thin man in a baggy suit named Alex told him to sign three packets of documents. Nobody explained what they were, he said.

“I’m from the hood — you don’t just sign anything. So, I get to reading the papers and it’s talking about some juvenile delinquent California ... case. And I’m like, I’m not even from California,” Dunlap said. “I’m from St. Louis. I ain’t ever been to juvie a day in my life.”

But, he said, the man kept insisting that he had.

“I’m like, ‘y’all got the wrong thing. I called y’all about a little foot case,’” Dunlap said. “He brushed it off. He was like ‘Nah, nah, nah it’s okay, just sign this.’”

After the county agreed to the \$4-billion settlement in April 2025, every person who sued needed to sign an agreement opting into the settlement, as well as a fact sheet, detailing the abuse they underwent as a youth, in order to be eligible for the payout. Each case is eligible for up to \$3 million, with attorneys pocketing between 33% and 45% in fees.

Dunlap said one document he was asked to sign appeared to be a questionnaire about abuse while the other was some sort of settlement agreement.

The county said it could not comment on whether DTLA submitted any additional documents for Dunlap, such as the fact sheet, after the July 25 exchange due to a “protective order and the confidentiality provisions of the settlement agreement.”

Dunlap’s account deepens questions around how DTLA, a high-volume personal injury firm known for representing injured drivers, acquired so many sex abuse plaintiffs — and whether some may be unknowing participants.

The Times located 10 people represented by DTLA in the sex abuse settlement who, like Dunlap, had previously used the firm for a personal injury lawsuit.

Before any money is disbursed, former presiding Superior Court Judge Daniel Buckley is vetting the firm’s cases and interviewing people whose accounts raise red flags. The L.A. County district attorney’s office has also asked for a six-month delay in making payments and recently sent letters to law firms detailing hundreds of plaintiffs it believes need further vetting, according to a spokesperson for the district attorney.

Dunlap said he refused to sign the paperwork and tried to leave. But he said the man insisted Dunlap see the “bossman” and left him in the glass room for about five minutes as he went to get a higher-up.

Dunlap said he had no interest in meeting the boss.

“At this point, it’s like a million thoughts racing through my head,” recounted Dunlap. “I’m like, damn, is he going to go grab the police? Am I going to go to jail? I gotta get the hell out of this office.”

The man came back and ushered Dunlap into the elevator to go to an office upstairs. Dunlap said he pressed the down button as the man hit the one to go up. The elevator hit the bottom floor and Dunlap says he rushed out.

Andrew Morrow, DTLA’s main attorney working on the sex abuse cases, later texted Dunlap a photo of what appears to be a retainer agreement with the firm dated Sept. 29, 2024, with a signature and Dunlap’s name printed underneath, according to screenshots of text messages reviewed by The Times.

Dunlap said he does not recognize the signature on the document and never signed a retainer for a sex abuse case. The firm said in a statement it uses “electronic processes to verify signatures.”

“What the hell is wrong with y’all,” Dunlap texted Morrow after the encounter. “I couldn’t even get a real apology just more pressure about signing sum papers I denied to sign over n over.”

“I told yall it wasn’t me over n over n over I demanded to leave over n over,” he continued.

Morrow said he would dismiss the lawsuit, but warned Dunlap he was “giving up a lot of money from the bad people you said hurt you.”

The lawsuit had not been dismissed as of March 23, leaving Dunlap part of the \$4-billion settlement.

Dunlap says he has no interest in the money and believes it should go to real victims. All he wants, he says, is for the lawsuit to go away.

“So how do I get my name out?”

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Source: <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2026-03-25/la-false-sex-abuse-claim-settlement-allegation>