

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
WISCONSIN

Derrick Watkins v. Warden Christopher Stevens, Security Director
Kind, DeGroot, Lt. A. Matushack, Lt. Chad Nyes, and John Doe

Watkins · No. 25-CV-1468-JPS · Decided April 2, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin granted Derrick Watkins leave to proceed without prepaying the filing fee and treated his proposed second amended complaint as operative. The court allowed Watkins to proceed on a Fourteenth Amendment equal protection claim against several prison officials and John Doe, alleging racially disparate treatment, but dismissed DeGroot for lack of personal involvement. The order also addressed service, exhaustion-related motions, filing-fee collection, and case-management requirements.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin
WRITING FOR THE COURT	J.P. Stadtmueller
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin
DECIDED	April 2, 2026
DOCKET	25-CV-1468-JPS
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Prisoner civil-rights action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983; the court screened the second amended complaint under the Prison Litigation Reform Act and ruled on the plaintiff's motion to proceed without prepaying the filing fee.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Under 28 U.S.C. § 1915A, the court screened the prisoner complaint using the Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6) standard, accepting well-pleaded factual allegations as true and asking whether the complaint stated a plausible claim for relief.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	nonprecedential district court order

TOPICS

- section 1983
- equal protection
- prisoners rights
- pleadings
- civil procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

civil rights litigation

prisoner litigation

federal civil procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the second amended complaint plausibly alleged a Fourteenth Amendment equal protection claim based on race against Stevens, Kind, Matushack, Nyes, and John Doe.
2. Whether DeGroot could be held liable under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 solely because he denied Watkins's prisoner grievance.
3. Whether Watkins should be permitted to proceed without prepaying the filing fee under the Prison Litigation Reform Act.

HOLDINGS

1. The complaint plausibly alleged that those defendants intentionally treated Watkins more harshly than other inmates because of race and therefore stated a Fourteenth Amendment equal protection claim at the pleading stage.
2. The complaint failed to state a § 1983 claim against DeGroot because his denial of Watkins's grievance, without participation in the underlying constitutional violation, did not establish personal involvement.
3. The court granted Watkins leave to proceed without prepaying the filing fee, subject to payment of the filing-fee balance through deductions from his prisoner trust account.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows a court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” (Section 2.1)

“Section 1983 creates a cause of action based on personal liability and predicated upon fault; thus, liability does not attach unless the individual defendant caused or participated in a constitutional deprivation.” (Section 2.3)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Watkins, an inmate at Green Bay Correctional Institution, alleged that prison officials punished him more harshly than other inmates after discovering documents on his legal USB drive and labeled him as a security threat. He alleged that similarly situated Latino and white inmates received less severe discipline or retained their jobs and housing privileges. He also alleged that Lieutenant Nyes punished him for hanging a towel on his bunk while failing to punish his white cellmate for similar conduct.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Derrick Watkins filed a pro se § 1983 complaint, then an amended complaint and a proposed second amended complaint. The court treated the second amended complaint as operative, granted leave to proceed without prepaying the filing fee, allowed an equal-protection claim to proceed against five defendants, and dismissed DeGroot for failure to state a claim.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- Cesal v. Moats, 851 F.3d 714, 720 (7th Cir. 2017)
- Booker-El v. Superintendent, Ind. State Prison, 668 F.3d 896, 899 (7th Cir. 2012)
- Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009)
- Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544, 556, 570 (2007)
- D.S. v. E. Porter Cnty. Sch. Corp., 799 F.3d 793, 798 (7th Cir. 2015)
- Buchanan-Moore v. County of Milwaukee, 570 F.3d 824, 827 (7th Cir. 2009)
- Perez v. Fenoglio, 792 F.3d 768, 776 (7th Cir. 2015)
- Lisle v. Welborn, 933 F.3d 705, 719-20 (7th Cir. 2019)
- Wolff v. McDonnell, 418 U.S. 539, 556 (1974)
- Ortiz v. Werner Enters., Inc., 834 F.3d 760 (7th Cir. 2016)
- Vance v. Peters, 97 F.3d 987, 991 (7th Cir. 1996)
- Palmer v. Marion County, 327 F.3d 588, 594 (7th Cir. 2003)
- Owens v. Hinsley, 635 F.3d 950, 953 (7th Cir. 2011)
- George v. Smith, 507 F.3d 605, 609 (7th Cir. 2007)
- Harris v. Meisner, No. 20-2650, 2021 WL 5563942, at *2 (7th Cir. Nov. 29, 2021)
- Runnion ex rel. Runnion v. Girl Scouts of Greater Chi. & Nw. Ind., 786 F.3d 510, 524 (7th Cir. 2015)

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