

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA**

Christopher Nathaniel Washington v. Ralph Diaz, et al.

Washington v. Diaz · No. 2:20-cv-2261 KJM AC P · Decided May 28, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California partially adopts findings and recommendations in a prisoner civil rights action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. The court denies defendants’ motion for summary judgment on First Amendment retaliation and Eighth Amendment failure-to-protect claims based on allegedly labeling the plaintiff a “snitch on staff,” declines to grant qualified immunity at that stage, and denies the plaintiff’s motions.

OPINION

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT 9 FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA 10 11 CHRISTOPHER NATHANIEL No. 2:20-cv-2261 KJM AC P
WASHINGTON, 12 Plaintiff, 13 ORDER v. 14 RALPH DIAZ, et al., 15 Defendants. 16 17
Christopher Nathaniel Washington, a state prisoner proceeding pro se, filed this civil 18 rights
action seeking relief under 42 U.S.C. § 1983.

The matter was referred to a United States 19 Magistrate Judge as provided by 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)
(1)(B) and Local Rule 302. 20 On March 10, 2025, the magistrate judge filed findings and
recommendations, which were 21 served on all parties and which contained notice to all parties
that any objections to the findings 22 and recommendations were to be filed within fourteen days.

ECF No. 142. Washington filed 23 objections to the findings and recommendations. ECF No. 144.
24 In accordance with the provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1)(C) and Local Rule 304, this 25
court has conducted a de novo review of this case.

Having reviewed the file, the court finds the 26 findings and recommendations to be supported by
the record and by proper analysis with respect 27 to Washington’s motion for reconsideration,
ECF No. 137, and Washington’s motion for leave to 28 file a motion for summary judgment, ECF
No. 140.

The court also accepts the findings and 1 recommendations that defendant’s motion for summary
judgment, ECF No. 126, should be 2 denied as to Washington’s First Amendment claim that
defendants retaliated against him by 3 threatening and harassing him for two months after he
settled a lawsuit against other officers, see 4 F&Rs at 9–10. 5 However, the court declines to
accept the findings and recommendations that defendant’s 6 motion for summary judgment, ECF

No. 126, should be granted as to Washington's First and 7 Eighth Amendment claims based on the allegation that defendants told other inmates' 8 Washington was a "snitch on staff," see F&Rs at 10–11.

9 It has been clearly established in this Circuit since at least 1989 that by spreading a rumor 10 a prisoner is a "snitch," prison staff violate the Eighth Amendment, given that they fail to protect 11 the prisoner against violence by other inmates. See *Valandingham v. Bojorquez*, 866 F.2d 1135, 12 1137–38 (9th Cir. 1989). It also is clearly established that when prison staff conspire to label a 13 prisoner a snitch in retaliation for the prisoner's speech, they violate the First Amendment.

See 14 *id.* at 1138. District courts in both this Circuit and in others have found prisoner-plaintiffs' First 15 and Eighth Amendment claims to be plausible when they allege prison staff spread rumors to 16 other prisoners the prisoner-plaintiff had snitched on prison staff. See *Mitchell v. Baeza*, No. 20- 17 0857, 2024 WL 2021861, at *4–5, 17 (E.D. Cal. Jan.

18, 2024) (finding plaintiff's allegations that 18 staff spread rumors to prisoners he was a snitch after he filed a grievance against staff members to 19 be plausible for both a First Amendment retaliation claim and an Eighth Amendment failure to 20 protect claim); *Quinn v. Singh*, No. 11-1085, 2012 WL 3868014, at *2, 7 (S.D. Cal. July 27, 21 2012) (same); cf. *Walton v. Harkleroad*, No. 13-1109, 2016 WL 11480713, at *2–3, 13 (W.D.

Pa. 22 Mar. 3, 2016) (finding a dispute of material fact over whether prison guard endangered plaintiff in 23 violation of the Eighth Amendment by spreading rumors plaintiff had snitched on staff). 24 In their motion for summary judgment, defendants argue "no reasonable officer could 25 conclude that Washington could be placed in danger if inmates knew he 'snitches on staff.'" 26 Mem. at 11, ECF No. 126-1.

Defendants also argue Washington was in a unit comprised of 27 inmates "who [had] left prison gangs and provided information regarding them to law 28 enforcement." *Id.* at 12. In other words, being labelled a snitch could not put Washington in 1 danger because he was housed in a unit filled with snitches. While these arguments may prove 2 convincing to a jury, they are untenable to support summary judgment, as they rely on inferences 3 favorable to the defendants and not to the plaintiff.

See *Matsushita Elec. Indus. Co. v. Zenith 4 Radio Corp.*, 475 U.S. 574, 587–88 (1986) (holding a court must find all inferences in favor of 5 the non-moving party at summary judgment). Further, defendants cannot cite caselaw that would 6 allow the court to grant them summary judgment on this record. Indeed, the only case defendants 7 cite, *Mitchell v. Baeza*, found plaintiff's Eighth and First Amendment claims to be plausible 8 because the plaintiff alleged prison staff spread rumors plaintiff had snitched on the staff.

See 9 2024 WL 2021861, at *4–5, 17. Similarly, in Valandingham, plaintiff alleged staff spread rumors 10 he had snitched on the staff—specifically the supervisor of the prison law library. See 11 Valandingham, 866 F.2d at 1138. 12 The evidence submitted by Washington to defeat defendants’ motion for summary 13 judgment, further, is not meaningfully different than the evidence the plaintiff submitted in 14 Valandingham to defeat summary judgment.

See id. at 1138–39. There, the plaintiff alleged 15 defendants called him a snitch. See id. The plaintiff also submitted an affidavit by an eyewitness 16 who testified defendants had called plaintiff a snitch to other inmates. See id. at 1139.

Here, 17 Washington has alleged defendants called him a snitch. See Fourth Am. Compl. at 4–5, 9, ECF 18 No. 54. Washington has also provided a declaration from another inmate, Brittney Gipson, who 19 witnessed defendants stating Washington “needs to be murdered he snitches on correction staff in 20 court!” Id. at 11.

As in Valandingham, Washington’s proffered evidence is enough to create a 21 dispute of material fact as to whether defendants violated his First and Eighth Amendment rights 22 by spreading rumors Washington was a snitch on staff. See Valandingham, 866 F.2d at 1138. 23 As Washington points out in his objections to the findings and recommendations, the 24 defendants should have known calling him a “snitch” “could have caused harm.” ECF No. 144 at 25 2.

Calling someone a snitch on staff may imply they are a snitch on others as well. Such a 26 statement might also imply defendants were seeking some type of quid pro quo: that hurting 27
///// 28 ///// 1 Washington might earn a reward because the staff was angry with him. Or it might imply to the 2 listener that defendants were not going to protect Washington should a prisoner desire to harm 3 him for some other reason.

A reasonable jury could thus find the staff spread rumors Washington 4 was a snitch on staff, that spreading the rumors Washington was a snitch on staff put 5 Washington’s safety at risk, and that the rumors chilled his First Amendment rights to complain 6 about staff conduct through legal channels. Taking all inferences in the light most favorable to 7 Washington, as the court must do at this stage of the litigation, see Matsushita Elec.

Indus. Co., 8 475 U.S. at 587–88 (1986); Adickes v. S.H. Kress & Co., 398 U.S. 144, 157 (1970), the court 9 finds a dispute of material fact exists as to whether spreading rumors Washington was a “snitch 10 on staff” put Washington at risk such that his First and Eighth Amendment rights were violated. 11 Accordingly, the court denies defendants’ motion for summary judgment on Washington’s 12 First Amendment retaliation claim on the theory defendants chilled Washington’s speech by 13 spreading rumors he was a snitch on staff and on Washington’s Eighth Amendment claim 14 defendants failed to protect Washington by spreading rumors he was a snitch on staff.

As it has been clearly established in this Circuit since 1989 that spreading rumors a prisoner is a snitch can violate the prisoner's First and Eighth Amendment rights, see *Valandingham*, 866 F.2d at 1138, the court also declines to grant defendants qualified immunity at this stage of the litigation. Defendants may renew their motion for qualified immunity at trial.

Accordingly, IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that: 1. The findings and recommendations (ECF No. 142) are adopted in part. 2. Plaintiff's motion for reconsideration of the order denying his motion for a preliminary injunction (ECF No. 137) is denied. 3. Plaintiff's motion for leave to file a motion for summary judgment and motion for summary judgment (ECF.

140) is denied. 4. Defendants' motion for summary judgment (ECF No. 126) is denied. 5. This matter is referred back to the assigned magistrate judge for all further pretrial proceedings. 1 This resolves ECF No. 142. 2 IT IS SO ORDERED. 3 DATED: May 27, 2025. 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28