

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Tommie Lee Jackson v. Rick Hill, et al.

Jackson v. Hill · No. 2:24-cv-3180-JDP (P) · Decided March 6, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California dismissed Tommie Lee Jackson’s pro se civil-rights complaint concerning alleged exposure to COVID-19 while incarcerated. The court held that the complaint failed to state claims under the Fifth, Fourteenth, and Eighth Amendments, including failure-to-protect and inadequate-medical-care theories. The court granted in forma pauperis status and dismissed the complaint with leave to amend within thirty days.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Jeremy D. Peterson
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
DECIDED	March 6, 2025
DOCKET	2:24-cv-3180-JDP (P)
DISPOSITION	dismissed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Prisoner civil-rights complaint screened under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e); complaint dismissed for failure to state a claim, with leave to amend.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court screened the in forma pauperis complaint under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e), accepting well-pleaded allegations for screening purposes, construing the pro se pleading liberally, and determining whether the complaint stated a plausible claim for relief under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8(a)(2).
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished
PARTIES	Tommie Lee Jackson v. Rick Hill, Tracy Johnson, Joseph Tuggle

TOPICS

- section 1983
- prisoners rights
- civil rights
- due process
- cruel and unusual punishment

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the complaint stated a cognizable Fifth Amendment due-process claim against a state-prison official.
2. Whether the complaint stated a Fourteenth Amendment procedural or substantive due-process claim.
3. Whether the complaint stated an Eighth Amendment failure-to-protect claim based on COVID-19 exposure.
4. Whether the complaint stated an Eighth Amendment inadequate-medical-care claim.
5. Whether the complaint adequately alleged each named defendant's personal involvement in the asserted constitutional violations.

HOLDINGS

1. A civil-rights complaint fails to state a claim against defendants when it does not allege specific facts connecting each defendant to the alleged wrongdoing. Jackson failed to state a claim against Johnson and Tuggle because he made no allegations connecting either defendant to the alleged violations.
2. The Fifth Amendment Due Process Clause does not apply to alleged conduct by state prison officials because it restricts the federal government, while state conduct is governed by the Fourteenth Amendment.
3. Jackson failed to state a Fourteenth Amendment due-process claim because he did not identify a constitutionally protected liberty or property interest or explain what process he was denied.
4. An Eighth Amendment failure-to-protect claim requires allegations that the conditions posed a substantial risk of serious harm and that the defendant was deliberately indifferent by subjectively recognizing the risk and failing to take reasonable measures. Jackson did not adequately allege deliberate indifference by Hill.
5. An Eighth Amendment inadequate-medical-care claim requires a sufficiently serious medical need and deliberate indifference, including a purposeful act or failure to respond to pain or a possible medical need and harm caused by that indifference. Jackson did not sufficiently allege that Hill deliberately disregarded his medical needs.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“A federal court must screen the complaint of any claimant seeking permission to proceed in forma pauperis.” (at 1)

“A complaint must contain a short and plain statement that plaintiff is entitled to relief” (at 1)

“There is no question that COVID-19 poses a substantial risk of serious harm to inmates.” (at 3)

“Plaintiff’s allegations hinge on the complaint that he contracted COVID-19, but his allegations fail to sufficiently explain how Hill failed to take reasonable measures to prevent such risk.” (at 4)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Jackson alleged that a warden moved him into a unit with twelve elderly, at-risk inmates apparently to prevent COVID-19 infection. About three weeks later, Jackson contracted COVID-19 and was moved to a unit with other infected inmates, where he remained ill. He alleged that COVID-19 protocols were not followed and that prison officials deliberately disregarded his health, but the complaint and exhibits connected the alleged conduct primarily to Rick Hill and did not connect Tracy Johnson or Joseph Tuggle to any wrongdoing.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Plaintiff, a former state inmate proceeding pro se, filed a complaint alleging that prison wardens violated his Fifth, Eighth, and Fourteenth Amendment rights in connection with his exposure to COVID-19. The court granted leave to proceed in forma pauperis, screened the complaint, found that it failed to state a claim, dismissed it with leave to amend, and allowed thirty days to file an amended complaint or a notice of voluntary dismissal.

DISPOSITION

dismissed

CASES CITED

- Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007)
- Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662, 678-79 (2009)
- Kobold v. Good Samaritan Regional Medical Center, 832 F.3d 1024, 1038 (9th Cir. 2016)
- Nagrampa v. MailCoups, Inc., 469 F.3d 1257, 1264 n.2 (9th Cir. 2006) (en banc)
- Haines v. Kerner, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972) (per curiam)
- Hayes v. Idaho Correctional Center, 849 F.3d 1204, 1208 (9th Cir. 2017)
- Bruns v. National Credit Union Administration, 122 F.3d 1251, 1257 (9th Cir. 1997)
- Ivey v. Board of Regents, 673 F.2d 266, 268 (9th Cir. 1982)
- Martinez v. Virga, No. 2:11-cv-0942-KJN (P), 2011 WL 1807442, at *2 (E.D. Cal. May 10, 2011)
- Castillo v. McFadden, 399 F.3d 993, 1002 n.5 (9th Cir. 2005)
- O'Con v. Katavich, No. 1:13-cv-1321-AWI-SKO, 2013 WL 6185212, at *6 (E.D. Cal. Nov. 26, 2013)
- Board of Regents of State Colleges v. Roth, 408 U.S. 564, 569 (1972)
- Shinault v. Hawks, 782 F.3d 1053, 1057 (9th Cir. 2015)
- Reno v. Flores, 507 U.S. 292, 302 (1993)
- Farmer v. Brennan, 511 U.S. 825, 834, 847 (1994)
- Plata v. Newsom, 445 F. Supp. 3d 557, 559 (N.D. Cal. 2020)
- Lemire v. California Department of Corrections & Rehabilitation, 726 F.3d 1062, 1081 (9th Cir. 2013)
- Jett v. Penner, 439 F.3d 1091, 1096 (9th Cir. 2006)
- Lacey v. Maricopa County, 693 F.3d 896, 907 n.1 (9th Cir. 2012) (en banc)

OPINION

(PC) Jackson v. Hill

PER CURIAM.

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8 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

9 FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

10 11 TOMMIE LEE JACKSON, Case No. 2:24-cv-3180-JDP (P) 12 Plaintiff, 13 v. ORDER 14
RICK HILL, et al., 15 Defendants. 16 17 Plaintiff, a former state inmate proceeding pro se, alleges
that defendants, Rick Hill, 18 Tracy Johnson, and Joseph Tuggle—each current or former wardens
of Folsom State Prison— 19 violated his Fifth, Eighth, and Fourteenth Amendment rights when
plaintiff was exposed to 20 COVID-19. ECF No. 1. Plaintiff’s allegations fail to state a claim.
Plaintiff may, if he 21 chooses, file an amended complaint that addresses the deficiencies noted
herein. I will grant 22 plaintiff’s application to proceed in forma pauperis. ECF No. 2. 23
Screening and Pleading Requirements 24 A federal court must screen the complaint of any
claimant seeking permission to proceed 25 in forma pauperis. See 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e). The court
must identify any cognizable claims and 26 dismiss any portion of the complaint that is frivolous
or malicious, fails to state a claim upon 27 28 1 which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary
relief from a defendant who is immune from such 2 relief. Id. 3 A complaint must contain a short
and plain statement that plaintiff is entitled to relief, 4 Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2), and provide “enough
facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its 5 face,” Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S.
544, 570 (2007). The plausibility standard does not 6 require detailed allegations, but legal
conclusions do not suffice. See Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 7 662, 678 (2009). If the allegations
“do not permit the court to infer more than the mere 8 possibility of misconduct,” the complaint
states no claim. Id. at 679. The complaint need not 9 identify “a precise legal theory.” Kobold v.
Good Samaritan Reg’l Med. Ctr., 832 F.3d 1024, 10 1038 (9th Cir. 2016). Instead, what plaintiff
must state is a “claim”—a set of “allegations that 11 give rise to an enforceable right to relief.”
Nagrampa v. MailCoups, Inc., 469 F.3d 1257, 1264 12 n.2 (9th Cir. 2006) (en banc) (citations
omitted). 13 The court must construe a pro se litigant’s complaint liberally. See Haines v. Kerner,
404 14 U.S. 519, 520 (1972) (per curiam). The court may dismiss a pro se litigant’s complaint “if
it 15 appears beyond doubt that the plaintiff can prove no set of facts in support of his claim which
16 would entitle him to relief.” Hayes v. Idaho Corr. Ctr., 849 F.3d 1204, 1208 (9th Cir. 2017). 17
However, ““a liberal interpretation of a civil rights complaint may not supply essential elements 18
of the claim that were not initially pled.”” Bruns v. Nat’l Credit Union Admin., 122 F.3d 1251, 19
1257 (9th Cir. 1997) (quoting Ivey v. Bd. of Regents, 673 F.2d 266, 268 (9th Cir. 1982)). 20
Analysis 21 Plaintiff alleges that a warden came to his cell and moved him to a different unit with
22 twelve other elderly, at-risk inmates—apparently to prevent the inmates from contracting 23
COVID-19. ECF No. 1 at 3. Plaintiff alleges that three weeks later, he contracted COVID-19. 24
Id. He alleges that he was then taken from his isolation unit and placed in another unit with other

25 COVID-infected inmates, where he remained sick. Id. He alleges that approximately seven more 26 infected inmates were brought to this unit to “integrate[] the virus into the population.” Id. 27 Plaintiff alleges that COVID protocols were not followed and that he should have been placed in 28 a more isolated environment. Id. Plaintiff alleges these actions violated his Fifth, Eighth, and 1 Fourteenth Amendment rights; he has checked the box for “medical care” to identify the basis of 2 his claim. Id. 3 To support his allegations, plaintiff attached various exhibits to his complaint, id. at 5-20, 4 which I will consider for screening purposes, Fed. R. Civ. P. 10 (c) (“A copy of a written 5 instrument that is an exhibit to a pleading is a part of the pleading for all purposes.”). Relevant to 6 the current claims, plaintiff provided a health care grievance form that he filed in June 2024, in 7 which he complained that, between April 2020 and April 2021, Hill and unnamed prison officials 8 were deliberately indifferent to his medical needs and failed to protect him. Id. at 9. Plaintiff 9 stated that he had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and was over the age of sixty-five, so he 10 was at a higher risk of contracting COVID, which he ultimately did contract. Id. He stated that 11 Hill and others intentionally introduced the unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain and stress, 12 and that his illness had continued to magnify. Id. at 11. He complained that the prison’s 13 “intention to infect as many inmates as possible was crystal clear,” and that he has continued to 14 experience health issues due to the “malicious disregard” to his health. Id. at 10. California 15 Correctional Health Care Services reviewed plaintiff’s grievance and determined that no 16 intervention was necessary. Id. at 5-8. 17 Plaintiff’s complaint fails to state a claim. As an initial matter, the allegations in the 18 complaint fail to connect any of the named defendants to any alleged wrongdoing. See id. at 3. 19 However, in taking plaintiff’s attached exhibits into consideration, it appears that plaintiff’s 20 allegations are against Hill. See id. at 9-11. Because plaintiff makes no allegations connecting 21 defendants Johnson or Tuggle, plaintiff fails to state a claim against either of them. See *Martinez 22 v. Virga*, No. 2:11-cv-0942-KJN (P), 2011 WL 1807442, at *2 (E.D. Cal. May 10, 2011) 23 (dismissing a complaint for failure to state a claim because plaintiff “failed to include specific 24 charging allegations for each defendant” demonstrating “how each named defendant [was] 25 responsible for the alleged” wrongdoing). 26 Plaintiff’s remaining claims against Hill fall short. First, it is unclear what provision 27 plaintiff attempts to base his Fifth Amendment claim upon, as plaintiff merely asserts that his 28 Fifth Amendment rights were violated. As best I can tell, plaintiff is raising a due process 1 challenge under the Fifth Amendment. But such claim cannot stand because Hill is a state actor, 2 and the due process clause of the Fifth Amendment only applies to federal actors. See *Castillo v. 3 McFadden*, 399 F.3d 993, 1002 n.5 (9th Cir. 2005) (“The Fifth Amendment prohibits the federal 4 government from depriving persons of due process, while the Fourteenth Amendment explicitly 5 prohibits deprivations without due process by the several States[.]”); see also *O’Con v. Katavich*,

6 No. 1:13-cv-1321-AWI-SKO, 2013 WL 6185212, at *6 (E.D. Cal. Nov. 26, 2013) (“Here, 7 correctional officers at a state prison are state actors and none of their conduct is an action of the

8 federal government. As such, the Fifth Amendment's Due Process Clause does not apply."). 9 Additionally, to the extent that plaintiff alleges Hill violated his due process rights under 10 the Fourteenth Amendment, such allegation fails to state a claim. The Fourteenth Amendment 11 prohibits any state from depriving a person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law. 12 U.S. Const. amend. XIV, § 1. The guarantee of procedural due process under the Fourteenth 13 Amendment applies only when a constitutionally protected liberty or property interest is at stake. 14 Bd. of Regents of State Colls. v. Roth, 408 U.S. 564, 569 (1972); Shinault v. Hawks, 782 F.3d 15 1053, 1057 (9th Cir. 2015). The "substantive component" of the "Fourteenth Amendment's 16 guarantee of 'due process of law' . . . forbids the government to infringe certain 'fundamental' 17 liberty interests at all, no matter what process is provided, unless the infringement is narrowly 18 tailored to serve a compelling state interest." Reno v. Flores, 507 U.S. 292, 302 (1993). Plaintiff 19 makes no allegations explaining how he believes his due process rights were violated—he does 20 not identify what process he was due that he did not receive, and he does not identify a 21 constitutionally protected liberty or property interest at stake. See generally ECF No. 1. As a 22 result, Plaintiff fails to allege a cognizable Fourteenth Amendment due process claim. 23 Plaintiff similarly fails to state a cognizable Eighth Amendment claim against Hill. While 24 plaintiff indicated that his Eighth Amendment claim was premised on inadequate medical care, 25 liberally construing his complaint, it appears that plaintiff is seeking to raise a failure to protect 26 claim. Regardless of which theory plaintiff may be pursuing, he fails to state a claim. 27 An Eighth Amendment claim premised on prison officials' failure to protect a plaintiff 28 requires the plaintiff to allege that the deprivation alleged was objectively sufficiently serious, 1 meaning the conditions posed a substantial risk of serious harm, and that the defendants were 2 deliberately indifferent to that harm. Farmer v. Brennan, 511 U.S. 825, 834 (1994). To be 3 deliberately different to a substantial risk of serious harm, defendants must be subjectively aware 4 of the risk and fail to take reasonable measures to prevent such risk. Id. at 847. 5 There is no question that COVID-19 poses a substantial risk of serious harm to inmates. 6 Plata v. Newsom, 445 F. Supp. 3d 557, 559 (N.D. Cal. 2020) ("[N]o one questions that [COVID- 7 19] poses a substantial risk of serious harm" to prisoners.). However, plaintiff does not 8 sufficiently allege that Hill was deliberately indifferent to this substantial risk of harm. Plaintiff 9 alleges that he was moved into an isolation unit to be protected from contracting COVID-19. 10 ECF No. 1 at 3. In the isolation unit, plaintiff still caught COVID. See id. It was not until he 11 was already diagnosed with COVID-19 that Hill allegedly moved the plaintiff to a different unit 12 where other COVID-positive inmates were located. See id. Plaintiff's allegations hinge on the 13 complaint that he contracted COVID-19, but his allegations fail to sufficiently explain how Hill 14 failed to take reasonable measures to prevent such risk. See Farmer, 511 U.S. at 847. Thus, to 15 the extent plaintiff alleges an Eighth Amendment failure to protect claim, his complaint fails to 16 state such claim. 17 Plaintiff's Eighth Amendment medical-care-based claim fails for similar reasons. Like 18 the failure to protect claim, an Eighth Amendment claim premised on inadequate medical care

19 requires a plaintiff to allege that he had a sufficiently serious medical need, and the defendant was 20 deliberately indifferent to that need. *Lemire v. Cal. Dep't of Corr. & Rehab.*, 726 F.3d 1062, 21 1081 (9th Cir. 2013). The deliberate indifference showing requires plaintiffs to allege “(a) a 22 purposeful act or failure to respond to a prisoner’s pain or possible medical need, and (b) harm 23 caused by the indifference.” *Jett v. Penner*, 439 F.3d 1091, 1096 (9th Cir. 2006). 24 Plaintiff fails to sufficiently allege that Hill was deliberately indifferent to his medical 25 needs. Based on the complaint, Hill moved plaintiff to a different unit to protect plaintiff and 26 others from contracting COVID. ECF No. 1 at 3. Once plaintiff contracted COVID, Hill moved 27 him to another unit to keep him with other COVID-positive inmates. *Id.* These allegations fail to 28 state how Hill failed to reasonably respond to plaintiff’s medical needs; Hill moved plaintiff to 1 prevent plaintiff from contracting COVID in the first place. See *Jett*, 439 F.3d at 1096. To the 2 extent plaintiff’s complaint hinges on him being moved to a COVID-positive unit, he similarly 3 fails to allege that Hill’s actions in moving an already COVID-positive plaintiff to a unit with 4 other COVID-positive inmates amounts to deliberate indifference. 5 Accordingly, plaintiff’s complaint is dismissed for failure to state a claim. I will allow 6 plaintiff a chance to amend his complaint before recommending that this action be dismissed. 7 Plaintiff should also take care to add specific factual allegations against each defendant. If 8 plaintiff decides to file an amended complaint, the amended complaint will supersede the current 9 one. See *Lacey v. Maricopa Cnty.*, 693 F.3d 896, 907 n.1 (9th Cir. 2012) (en banc). This means 10 that the amended complaint will need to be complete on its face without reference to the prior 11 pleading. See E.D. Cal. Local Rule 220. Once an amended complaint is filed, the current one no 12 longer serves any function. Therefore, in an amended complaint, as in the original, plaintiff will 13 need to assert each claim and allege each defendant’s involvement in sufficient detail. The 14 amended complaint should be titled “First Amended Complaint” and refer to the appropriate case 15 number. If plaintiff does not file an amended complaint, I will recommend that this action be 16 dismissed. 17 Accordingly, it is hereby ORDERED that: 18 1. Plaintiff’s request for leave to proceed in forma pauperis, ECF No. 2, is GRANTED. 19 2. Plaintiff’s complaint, ECF No. 1, is DISMISSED with leave to amend. 20 3. Within thirty days from service of this order, plaintiff shall file either (1) an amended 21 complaint or (2) notice of voluntary dismissal of this action without prejudice. 22 4. Failure to timely file either an amended complaint or notice of voluntary dismissal may 23 result in the imposition of sanctions, including a recommendation that this action be dismissed 24 with prejudice pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 41(b). 25 5. The Clerk of Court shall send plaintiff a complaint form with this order. 26 27 28 1 > IT IS SO ORDERED. 3 (| { Wine Dated: _ March 5, 2025 Q_—_.

4 JEREMY D. PETERSON

5 UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE

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