

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
MISSOURI, EASTERN DIVISION

Eric Busey v. Sarah Womack, et al.

No. 4:26-cv-21-CMS (E.D. Mo. May 5, 2026) · No. No. 4:26-cv-21-CMS · Decided May 5, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri grants Eric Busey’s application to proceed in forma pauperis and assesses an initial partial filing fee of \$2.64. The court denies his motion for appointment of counsel without prejudice and directs him to file an amended complaint connecting each defendant to the alleged violations of his religious dietary rights. The court warns that failure to file an amended complaint within 30 days will result in dismissal without prejudice.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri, Eastern Division
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Cristian M. Stevens
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri, Eastern Division
DECIDED	May 5, 2026
DOCKET	No. 4:26-cv-21-CMS
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	A state prisoner filed a civil-rights action, an application to proceed in forma pauperis, and a motion for appointment of counsel. On initial review, the court granted in forma pauperis status, denied appointment of counsel without prejudice, and allowed plaintiff to file an amended complaint because the original complaint did not connect the defendants to the alleged religious-diet violations.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2), the court must dismiss an in forma pauperis complaint that is frivolous, malicious, or fails to state a claim. The court applies the facial-plausibility standard of Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly and Ashcroft v. Iqbal, assumes the truth of well-pleaded factual allegations, and liberally construes a self-represented litigant's complaint while not supplying facts or excusing failure to comply with procedural rules.

PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished
PARTIES	Eric Busey v. Sarah Womack, M. Martin, et al.

TOPICS

pleadings prisoners rights civil rights motion to amend civil procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

civil procedure prisoner civil rights religious-liberty claims in forma pauperis proceedings

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the complaint stated a plausible claim for relief under the applicable federal pleading standards when it alleged general criticisms of prison food services but did not connect either defendant to the alleged religious-diet violations.
2. Whether plaintiff should be granted leave to file an amended complaint identifying each defendant's personal involvement and complying with Rules 8 and 10 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure.
3. Whether plaintiff was entitled to appointment of counsel at this stage of the civil action.
4. Whether plaintiff was entitled to proceed in forma pauperis and what initial partial filing fee was required under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(1).

HOLDINGS

1. The complaint failed to state a claim because it contained only general criticisms of food services and did not allege facts connecting either defendant to the alleged religious violations.
2. The court allowed plaintiff to file an amended complaint within thirty days and required the amendment to identify the factual basis for each defendant's liability and comply with Rules 8 and 10.
3. Appointment of counsel was denied without prejudice because plaintiff had not yet presented a nonfrivolous claim and the case appeared factually and legally straightforward.
4. Plaintiff was granted leave to proceed without prepaying costs or fees and was assessed an initial partial filing fee of \$2.64.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“A claim has facial plausibility when the pleaded factual content allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.”

“A court issues a preliminary injunction in a lawsuit to preserve the status quo and prevent irreparable harm until the court has an opportunity to rule on the lawsuit’s merits.”

“A pro se litigant has no statutory or constitutional right to have counsel appointed in a civil case”

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Plaintiff, a state prisoner held at Eastern Reception Diagnostic and Correctional Center in Missouri, alleged that prison food-service personnel violated his religious dietary rights by providing food that was opened, placing peanut butter in small containers, and failing to have a rabbi bless the food. He identified Sarah Womack and M. Martin as defendants but did not allege specific acts or omissions connecting either defendant to the alleged violations. Plaintiff sought monetary relief, kosher meals, kosher-certified food-service workers, and other control over the religious-diet program.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Plaintiff filed the action on January 6, 2026, alleging violations of his religious dietary rights, followed by a supplement invoking RLUIPA and mentioning a preliminary injunction. The court reviewed the complaint under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2), found that it failed to state claims against the named defendants because it contained only general criticisms of food services, and granted leave to amend within thirty days. The court also granted in forma pauperis status, assessed an initial partial filing fee of \$2.64, and denied the motion for appointment of counsel without prejudice.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 328 (1989)
- *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007)
- *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 663, 678-79 (2009)
- *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97, 106 (1976)
- *Solomon v. Petray*, 795 F.3d 777, 787 (8th Cir. 2015)
- *Stone v. Harry*, 364 F.3d 912, 914-15 (8th Cir. 2004)
- *Martin v. Aubuchon*, 623 F.2d 1282, 1286 (8th Cir. 1980)
- *McNeil v. United States*, 508 U.S. 106, 113 (1993)
- *Devose v. Herrington*, 42 F.3d 470, 471 (8th Cir. 1994)
- *In re Wireless Telephone Federal Cost Recovery Fees Litigation*, 396 F.3d 922, 928 (8th Cir. 2005)
- *Topchian v. JPMorgan Chase Bank, N.A.*, 760 F.3d 843, 848 (8th Cir. 2014)
- *Keeper v. King*, 130 F.3d 1309, 1314 (8th Cir. 1997)
- *Ward v. Smith*, 721 F.3d 940, 942 (8th Cir. 2013)
- *Stevens v. Redwing*, 146 F.3d 538, 546 (8th Cir. 1998)
- *Patterson v. Kelley*, 902 F.3d 845, 850 (8th Cir. 2018)
- *Phillips v. Jasper Cty. Jail*, 437 F.3d 791, 794 (8th Cir. 2006)

OPINION

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT EASTERN DISTRICT OF MISSOURI EASTERN
DIVISION ERIC BUSEY,)) Plaintiff,)) v.) No. 4:26-cv-21-CMS) SARAH WOMACK, et al.,)
) Defendants.) MEMORANDUM AND ORDER This matter is before the Court on Plaintiff's
application to proceed without prepaying costs or fees, ECF No. 2, and motion for appointment of
counsel, ECF No. 3.

After considering the application and financial information provided, the Court will grant the application and assess an initial partial filing fee of \$2.64. See 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(1). The motion for appointment of counsel will be denied. Additionally, for the reasons discussed below, the Court will order Plaintiff to file an amended complaint. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(1) Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(1), a prisoner bringing a civil action in forma pauperis is required to pay the full amount of the filing fee.

If the prisoner has insufficient funds in his prison account to pay the entire fee, the Court must assess and, when funds exist, collect an initial partial filing fee of 20 percent of the greater of (1) the average monthly deposits in the prisoner's account, or (2) the average monthly balance in the prisoner's account for the prior six- month period.

After payment of the initial partial filing fee, the prisoner is required to make monthly payments of 20 percent of the preceding month's income credited to the prisoner's account. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(2). The agency having custody of the prisoner will forward these monthly payments to the Clerk of Court each time the amount in the prisoner's account exceeds \$10.00, until the filing fee is fully paid.

Id. Plaintiff is a state court prisoner currently being held at Eastern Reception Diagnostic and Correctional Center in Bonne Terre, Missouri. ECF No. 1. In support of his motion to proceed without prepaying fees and costs, Plaintiff submitted an inmate account statement showing average monthly deposits of \$9, and an average monthly balance of \$13.19 over the six-month period prior to case initiation.

ECF No. 4. The Court finds that Plaintiff has insufficient funds in his prison account to pay the entire fee and will therefore assess an initial partial filing fee of \$2.64, which is twenty percent of Plaintiff's average monthly balance. See 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(1). Legal Standard on Initial Review Under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2), the Court is required to dismiss a complaint filed in forma pauperis if it is frivolous, malicious, or fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted.

An action is frivolous if it "lacks an arguable basis in either law or fact." *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 328 (1989). An action fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted if it does not plead "enough facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face." *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007). "A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads

factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009).

Determining whether a complaint states a plausible claim for relief is a context-specific task that requires the reviewing court to draw upon judicial experience and common sense. *Id.* at 679. The court must assume the veracity of well-pleaded facts but need not accept as true “[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements.” *Id.* at 678 (citing *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555).

This Court must liberally construe complaints filed by laypeople. *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97, 106 (1976). This means that “if the essence of an allegation is discernible,” the Court should “construe the complaint in a way that permits the layperson’s claim to be considered within the proper legal framework.” *Solomon v. Petray*, 795 F.3d 777, 787 (8th Cir.

2015) (quoting *Stone v. Harry*, 364 F.3d 912, 914 (8th Cir. 2004)). However, even self-represented complaints must allege facts which, if true, state a claim for relief as a matter of law. *Martin v. Aubuchon*, 623 F.2d 1282, 1286 (8th Cir. 1980). Federal courts are not required to assume facts that are not alleged, *Stone*, 364 F.3d at 914-15, nor are they required to interpret procedural rules to excuse mistakes by those who proceed without counsel.

See *McNeil v. United States*, 508 U.S. 106, 113 (1993). The Complaint On January 6, 2026, Plaintiff filed the instant action against Sarah Womack, Aramark Food Service Director, and M. Martin, Food Service Manager II. ECF. No. 1 at 2-3. Plaintiff alleges that his religious dietary rights are being violated. *Id.* at 4. Plaintiff is Jewish and only eats a “Certified Religious Diet” (CRD).

Id. He alleges that “food service has and is intentionally violating our federally protected rights to eat prepackaged (un-opened Kosher food).” *Id.* He lists several complaints about the food including that food is open, peanut butter is being put in small containers, and there is no Rabbi present to bless the food. *Id.* For injuries, Plaintiff states his mental health suffered.

Id. He also states that he believes his food will be poisoned. *Id.* For relief, Plaintiff seeks \$12,000 from each defendant, Kosher meals, and Kosher-certified inmates working in food service. *Id.* at 5. Plaintiff also wants to work in the CRD room and to pick his own crew to work with him. *Id.* On March 9, 2026, Plaintiff filed a supplement to his complaint. ECF No. 5.

This supplement asserted that Plaintiff would like to proceed under the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA). *Id.* at 2. He also clarified that he is not requesting money damages for himself but rather wants any money damages to be donated to the federal government to fund the CRD. *Id.* Discussion Having thoroughly reviewed and liberally construed Plaintiff’s complaint, the Court concludes that his claims are subject to dismissal.

However, in consideration of Plaintiff's self-represented status, the Court will allow him to file an amended complaint. Plaintiff does not make any allegations against the defendants in his complaint. Instead, he provides only general criticisms of food services. "A claim has facial plausibility when the pleaded factual content allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged." *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 663 (emphasis added).

Here, there is no basis to determine whether either defendant is liable for the alleged religious violations, as Plaintiff in no way connects the defendants to these violations in his complaint. Further, Plaintiff mentions a preliminary injunction in his supplement to his complaint. ECF No. 5 at 5. If this is intended as a request for relief, Plaintiff must file a separate motion seeking such relief.

The Court warns Plaintiff that "[a] court issues a preliminary injunction in a lawsuit to preserve the status quo and prevent irreparable harm until the court has an opportunity to rule on the lawsuit's merits. Thus, a party moving for a preliminary injunction must necessarily establish a relationship between the injury claimed in the party's motion and the conduct asserted in the complaint." *Devose v. Herrington*, 42 F.3d 470, 471 (8th Cir.

1994) (internal citation omitted). In consideration of Plaintiff's self-represented status, the Court will give him the opportunity to submit an amended complaint. Plaintiff is warned that the filing of an amended complaint replaces the original complaint, and so it must include all claims Plaintiff wishes to bring. E.g., *In re Wireless Telephone Federal Cost Recovery Fees Litigation*, 396 F.3d 922, 928 (8th Cir.

2005). Plaintiff must follow Rules 8 and 10 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. Rule 8 requires Plaintiff to set forth a short and plain statement of the claim showing entitlement to relief, and it also requires that each averment be simple, concise and direct. Rule 10 requires Plaintiff to state his claims in separately numbered paragraphs, each limited as far as practicable to a single set of circumstances.

Plaintiff's failure to make specific factual allegations against any defendant will result in the dismissal of that defendant. If Plaintiff seeks to sue multiple defendants, he must establish the responsibility of each defendant for the alleged harm.

For each defendant, Plaintiff must allege facts showing how that defendant's acts or omissions violated his constitutional rights. See *Topchian v. JPMorgan Chase Bank, N.A.*, 760 F.3d 843, 848 (8th Cir. 2014). Conclusory allegations about a defendant's supervisory role will not suffice. See *Keeper v. King*, 130 F.3d 1309, 1314 (8th Cir. 1997) ("[A] general responsibility for supervising the operations of a prison is insufficient to establish the personal involvement required to support liability.") (citation and internal quotation marks omitted).

In the “Statement of Claim” section, Plaintiff should begin by writing a defendant’s name. In separate, numbered paragraphs under that name, Plaintiff should: (1) set forth the factual allegations supporting his claim against that defendant; (2) state what constitutional or federal statutory right(s) that defendant violated; and (3) state whether the defendant is being sued in his/her individual capacity or official capacity.

If Plaintiff is suing more than one defendant, he should proceed in the same manner with each one, separately writing each individual defendant’s name and, under that name, in numbered paragraphs, the factual allegations supporting his claim or claims against that defendant. No introductory or conclusory paragraphs are necessary. Plaintiff must not amend a complaint by filing separate documents.

Instead, he must file a single, comprehensive pleading that sets forth his claims for relief. If Plaintiff fails to file an amended complaint within thirty (30) days in accordance with the instructions set forth herein, the Court will dismiss this action without prejudice and without further notice to Plaintiff. Motion to Appoint Counsel Plaintiff has filed a motion to appoint counsel.

ECF No. 3. In civil cases, a self- represented litigant does not have a constitutional or statutory right to appointed counsel. *Ward v. Smith*, 721 F.3d 940, 942 (8th Cir. 2013); see also *Stevens v. Redwing*, 146 F.3d 538, 546 (8th Cir. 1998) (stating that “[a] pro se litigant has no statutory or constitutional right to have counsel appointed in a civil case”).

Rather, a district court may appoint counsel in a civil case if the court is “convinced that an indigent plaintiff has stated a non-frivolous claim... and where the nature of the litigation is such that plaintiff as well as the court will benefit from the assistance of counsel.” *Patterson v. Kelley*, 902 F.3d 845, 850 (8th Cir. 2018). When determining whether to appoint counsel for an indigent litigant, a court considers relevant factors such as the complexity of the case, the ability of the pro se litigant to investigate the facts, the existence of conflicting testimony, and the ability of the pro se litigant to present his or her claim.

Phillips v. Jasper Cty. Jail, 437 F.3d 791, 794 (8th Cir. 2006). After reviewing these factors, the Court finds that the appointment of counsel is not warranted currently. Plaintiff has yet to file a complaint that survives initial review, so it cannot be said that he has presented non-frivolous claims. Additionally, this case appears to involve straightforward factual and legal issues, and there is no indication that Plaintiff cannot investigate the facts and present his claims to the Court.

The Court will entertain future motions for appointment of counsel as the case progresses, if appropriate. Accordingly, IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that Plaintiff’s motion for appointment of counsel (ECF No. 3) is DENIED at this time without prejudice. IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that Plaintiff’s application to proceed without prepaying costs or fees (ECF No. 2) is GRANTED.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that Plaintiff must pay an initial filing fee of \$2.64 within thirty (30) days of the date of this Order. Plaintiff is instructed to make his remittance payable to “Clerk, United States District Court,” and to include upon it: (1) his name; (2) his prison registration number; (3) the case number; and (4) the statement that the remittance is for an original proceeding.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that the Clerk of Court shall mail to plaintiff two blank Prisoner Civil Rights Complaint forms. Plaintiff may request additional forms as needed. IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that Plaintiff shall file an amended complaint on the Court-provided form in accordance with the instructions stated above within thirty (30) days of the date of this Order.

Plaintiff is advised that his amended complaint will take the place of his original filing and will be the only pleading that this Court will review. IT IS FINALLY ORDERED that if Plaintiff fails to comply with this Order, the Court will dismiss this action without prejudice and without further notice to Plaintiff. Dated this Sth day of May, 2026.; oy { / —f iT SV FW) /U CRISTIAN M. STEVENS UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE