

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Jones v. San Diego Sheriff's Department

Jones · No. 25-cv-00779-BAS-KSC · Decided August 5, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Southern District of California granted Terrell Moreno Jones's motion to proceed in forma pauperis and assessed an initial partial filing fee. The court dismissed his 42 U.S.C. § 1983 complaint without prejudice under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B) and 1915A(b), concluding that the San Diego Sheriff's Department was not a proper § 1983 defendant and that the allegations did not adequately plead municipal liability against San Diego County. The court granted Jones 60 days to file an amended complaint.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Southern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Cynthia Bashant
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Southern District of California
DECIDED	August 5, 2025
DOCKET	25-cv-00779-BAS-KSC
DISPOSITION	dismissed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	A pro se detainee filed a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 complaint concerning conditions of confinement and moved to proceed in forma pauperis. The district court granted IFP status, screened the complaint under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B) and 1915A(b), dismissed it without prejudice for failure to state a claim, and granted leave to amend.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court applied the Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6) plausibility standard during mandatory screening under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B) and 1915A(b).
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished
PARTIES	Terrell Moreno Jones v. San Diego Sheriff's Department

TOPICS

- section 1983
- prisoners rights
- municipal liability
- motions to dismiss
- civil procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

civil rights

prisoner litigation

municipal liability

civil procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the San Diego Sheriff's Department is a person subject to suit under 42 U.S.C. § 1983.
2. Whether the complaint adequately pleaded municipal liability against San Diego County under Monell and its progeny.
3. Whether the complaint stated a claim under the pleading standard applicable to screening under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B) and 1915A(b).
4. Whether Jones should receive leave to amend.

HOLDINGS

1. A county sheriff's department, as a department or subdivision of the county, is not a person subject to suit under § 1983.
2. A municipality cannot be held vicariously liable under § 1983 for the unconstitutional acts of its employees; a plaintiff must plausibly allege that a policy, custom, practice, or failure to train caused the constitutional injury.
3. The complaint was subject to dismissal because it did not state a plausible claim for relief against the named defendant.
4. A pro se plaintiff should be granted leave to amend unless it is absolutely clear that the pleading deficiencies cannot be cured by amendment.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“However, the Sheriff’s Department, as a department or subdivision of the County of San Diego, is not a “person” subject to suit under § 1983.” (Order at 6)

“A local governmental entity, like the County of San Diego, may not be held vicariously liable under section 1983 simply based on the allegedly unconstitutional acts of its employees.” (Order at 7)

“Instead, a municipal entity is liable under section 1983 only if the plaintiff alleges his constitutional injury was caused by employees acting pursuant to the municipality’s policy or custom.” (Order at 7)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Jones, a detainee in San Diego County jails, alleged that he was housed with dangerous or mentally ill cellmates and was assaulted, that staff delayed responding to an anxiety attack, and that he was subjected to allegedly invasive strip searches. He also alleged unsanitary and dangerous jail conditions, discriminatory or harassing conduct, interference with family visits and inmate-account deposits, inadequate food, and exposure to an inmate with a staph infection. He named only the San Diego Sheriff's Department as a defendant and did not identify a county policy, custom, practice, or failure to train causing the alleged constitutional violations.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Jones filed the complaint and an IFP motion in the Southern District of California. The court granted IFP status and assessed an initial partial filing fee of \$24.96. On sua sponte screening, the court concluded that the San Diego Sheriff's Department was not a person subject to suit under § 1983 and that the allegations did not adequately plead municipal liability against San Diego County; the complaint was dismissed without prejudice with sixty days to amend.

DISPOSITION

dismissed

CASES CITED

- Andrews v. Cervantes, 493 F.3d 1047, 1051 (9th Cir. 2007)
- Escobedo v. Applebees, 787 F.3d 1226, 1234 (9th Cir. 2015)
- Bruce v. Samuels, 577 U.S. 82, 84 (2016)
- Taylor, 281 F.3d at 850
- Lopez v. Smith, 203 F.3d 1122, 1126-27 (9th Cir. 2000) (en banc)
- Rhodes v. Robinson, 621 F.3d 1002, 1004 (9th Cir. 2010)
- Watison v. Carter, 668 F.3d 1108, 1112 (9th Cir. 2012)
- Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009)
- Tsao v. Desert Palace, Inc., 698 F.3d 1128, 1138 (9th Cir. 2012)
- Vance v. County of Santa Clara, 928 F. Supp. 993, 995-96 (N.D. Cal. 1996)
- Stump v. Gates, 777 F. Supp. 808, 816 (D. Colo. 1991), aff'd, 986 F.2d 1429 (10th Cir. 1993)
- United States v. Kama, 394 F.3d 1236, 1239 (9th Cir. 2005)
- Rodriguez v. County of Contra Costa, No. C 13-02516 SBA, 2013 WL 5946112, at *3 (N.D. Cal. Nov. 1, 2013)
- Hervey v. Estes, 65 F.3d 784, 791 (9th Cir. 1995)
- Nelson v. County of Sacramento, 926 F. Supp. 2d 1159, 1170 (E.D. Cal. 2013)
- Boone v. Deutsche Bank National Trust Co., 2017 WL 117966, at *3 (E.D. Cal. 2017)
- Board of County Commissioners v. Brown, 520 U.S. 397, 403 (1997)
- Monell v. Department of Social Services, 436 U.S. 658, 691 (1978)
- Jackson v. Barnes, 749 F.3d 755, 762 (9th Cir. 2014)
- Villegas v. Gilroy Garlic Festival Association, 541 F.3d 950, 964 (9th Cir. 2008)
- AE ex rel. Hernandez v. County of Tulare, 666 F.3d 631, 637 (9th Cir. 2012)
- Rosati v. Igbino, 791 F.3d 1037, 1039 (9th Cir. 2015)
- Akhtar v. Mesa, 698 F.3d 1202, 1212 (9th Cir. 2012)
- Hal Roach Studios, Inc. v. Richard Feiner & Co., Inc., 896 F.2d 1542, 1546 (9th Cir. 1990)
- Lacey v. Maricopa County, 693 F.3d 896, 928 (9th Cir. 2012)
- Lira v. Herrera, 427 F.3d 1164, 1169 (9th Cir. 2005)

OPINION

Jones v. San Diego Sheriffs Dept.

PER CURIAM.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

9 SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

10 11 TERRELL MORENO JONES, Case No. 25-cv-00779-BAS-KSC Booking #24736966, 12
ORDER: Plaintiff, 13

v. (1) GRANTING MOTION TO

14

PROCEED IN FORMA

15 PAUPERIS (ECF No. 2); AND

SAN DIEGO SHERIFF'S DEP'T,

16 Defendant. (2) DISMISSING COMPLAINT

17 FOR FAILURE TO STATE A

CLAIM PURSUANT TO 28

18

U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B) AND

19 1915A(b) 20

21 I. INTRODUCTION

22 Plaintiff Terrell Moreno Jones ("Plaintiff" or "Jones"), a detainee proceeding pro se, 23 has
filed a civil rights complaint pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983, along with a motion to 24 proceed in
forma pauperis ("IFP"). (See ECF Nos. 1, 2.) In his Complaint, Jones alleges 25 his constitutional
rights were violated while he has been detained in San Diego County 26 jails. (ECF No. 1 at 3.) As
discussed below, the Court grants Plaintiff's IFP motion and 27 dismisses the Complaint without
prejudice. 28

1 II. MOTION TO PROCEED IFP

2 All parties instituting any civil action, suit or proceeding in a district court of the 3 United States,
except an application for writ of habeas corpus, must pay a filing fee of 4 \$405.1 See 28 U.S.C. §
1914(a). A party may initiate a civil action without prepaying the 5 required filing fee if the Court
grants leave to proceed IFP based on indigency. 28 U.S.C. 6 § 1915(a); *Andrews v. Cervantes*, 493
F.3d 1047, 1051 (9th Cir. 2007). 7 To proceed IFP, plaintiffs must establish their inability to pay by
filing an affidavit 8 regarding their income and assets. See *Escobedo v. Applebees*, 787 F.3d 1226,
1234 (9th

9 Cir. 2015). Prisoners must also submit a "certified copy of the [prisoner's] trust fund

10 account statement (or institutional equivalent) for . . . the 6-month period immediately 11
preceding the filing of the complaint." 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(2). From the certified trust 12 account
statement, the Court assesses an initial payment of 20% of (a) the average monthly 13 deposits in

the account for the past six months, or (b) the average monthly balance in the 14 account for the past six months, whichever is greater, unless the prisoner has no assets. See 15 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(1), (4). Prisoners who proceed IFP must repay the entire fee in 16 installments regardless of whether their action is ultimately dismissed. 28 U.S.C. 17 § 1915(b)(2); *Bruce v. Samuels*, 577 U.S. 82, 84 (2016). 18 In support of his IFP Motion, Jones has provided a copy of his prison certificate and 19 trust account statement. (See ECF No. 2.) During the six months prior to filing suit, Jones 20 had an average monthly balance of \$41.37 and average monthly deposits of \$124.83; and 21 at the time he filed suit he had an available account balance of \$25.18. (*Id.* at 6–7.) 22 Accordingly, the Court GRANTS Plaintiff’s IFP motion and assesses an initial partial 23 filing fee of \$24.96 pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(1). This initial fee need be collected, 24 however, only if sufficient funds are available in Plaintiff’s account at the time this Order 25 26 1 Civil litigants must pay an administrative fee of \$55 in addition to the \$350 filing fee. See 27 28 U.S.C. § 1914(a) (Judicial Conference Schedule of Fees, District Court Misc. Fee Schedule, § 14 (eff. Dec. 1, 2023)). The additional \$55 administrative fee does not apply to persons granted 28 1 is executed. See 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(4) (providing that “[i]n no event shall a prisoner be 2 prohibited from bringing a civil action or appealing a civil or criminal judgment for the 3 reason that the prisoner has no assets and no means by which to pay the initial partial filing 4 fee.”); *Taylor*, 281 F.3d at 850 (finding that 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(4) acts as a “safety-valve” 5 preventing dismissal of a prisoner’s IFP case based solely on a “failure to pay . . . due to 6 the lack of funds available to him when payment is ordered.”). Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. 7 § 1915(b), the agency having custody of Plaintiff will forward payments to the Clerk in 8 installment provisions until the \$350 statutory fee is paid in full.

9 III. SCREENING PURSUANT TO 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B) AND 1915A(b)

10 A. Legal Standards 11 Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B) and 1915A(b), the Court must screen a 12 prisoner’s IFP complaint and sua sponte dismiss it to the extent that it is frivolous, 13 malicious, fails to state a claim, or seeks damages from defendants who are immune. See 14 *Lopez v. Smith*, 203 F.3d 1122, 1126–27 (9th Cir. 2000) (en banc); *Rhodes v. Robinson*, 15 621 F.3d 1002, 1004 (9th Cir. 2010). “The standard for determining whether a plaintiff 16 has failed to state a claim upon which relief can be granted under § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii) is the 17 same as the Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6) standard for failure to state a claim.” 18 *Watson v. Carter*, 668 F.3d 1108, 1112 (9th Cir. 2012). Rule 12(b)(6) requires that a 19 complaint “contain sufficient factual matter . . . to state a claim to relief that is plausible on 20 its face.” *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (internal quotation marks omitted). 21 While detailed factual allegations are not required, “[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements 22 of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice” to state a 23 claim. *Id.* The “mere possibility of misconduct” or “unadorned, the defendant-unlawfully- 24 harmed me accusation[s]” fall short of meeting this plausibility standard. *Id.* 25 To state a claim under § 1983, a plaintiff must plausibly allege “both (1) deprivation 26 of a right secured by the Constitution and laws of the United

States, and (2) that the 27 deprivation was committed by a person acting under color of state law.” Tsao v. Desert 28 Palace, Inc., 698 F.3d 1128, 1138 (9th Cir. 2012). 1 B. Plaintiff’s Allegations 2 Plaintiff alleges that on August 3, 2024, he was housed in the San Diego Central Jail 3 (“SDCJ”). (ECF No. 1 at 3.) While Plaintiff’s charged offense was non-violent, he was 4 housed in a three-man cell with a “mentally ill inmate” and an inmate with a history of 5 violence. (Id.) Plaintiff was afraid because he is frail and not “in a position to . . . defend 6 [him]self.” (Id.) 7 At some point, Plaintiff’s cellmate with a history of violence “challenge[d]” him. 8 (Id.) Jones tried to ignore him but when he got off his bunk, the inmate “struck” Jones 9 twice in the head and face. (Id.) Jones wanted to push the “emergency button and call on 10 staff” but he was afraid he would be labeled a snitch. (Id.) So instead, Plaintiff “tried 11 defending [him]self by fighting.” (Id.) Eventually, the inmate “stopped being aggressive.” 12 (Id. at 4.) Some days later, the same inmate hit Jones again. (Id.) Jones states he was 13 again afraid to summon staff and therefore “had no choice but to fight back.” (Id.) 14 On November 21, 2024, Jones had an anxiety attack and told his cellmate to press 15 the emergency button. (Id. at 6.) But staff did not respond for “nearly a[n] hour.” (Id.) By 16 that time, Jones had a bloody nose and had begun vomiting. (Id.) It was another hour 17 before Jones received medication for his anxiety attack. (Id.) 18 On December 8, 2024, Jones was strip searched. (Id. at 5.) Staff told Jones to “bend 19 over while your legs are straight, open your cheeks and cough.” (Id.) Per Jones, the search 20 was more invasive than the strip search procedure performed when inmates are initially 21 booked into the jail. (Id.) Jones also states he “believe[s] . . . a cellular device [was] used 22 because [he] heard chirping sounds and laughs and giggles from staff.” (Id.) 23 On February 5, 2025, Jones filed a civil action regarding conditions at the jail. (Id. 24 at 8.) After receiving documents back from the lawsuit, Jones noticed someone at George 25 Bailey Detention Facility (“GBDF”)² had “edit[ed]” his paperwork. (Id. at 10.) On 26 27 2 It appears Plaintiff was transferred to GBDF from SDCJ at some point after December 8, 28 1 February 16, 2025, members of Plaintiff’s family came to visit him in jail, but they were 2 “harassed and discriminated against” and the visit never took place. (Id. at 8.) Jones was 3 not told about his family’s attempt to visit him and only found out later when he spoke to 4 them on the phone. (Id.) Staff also prevented Plaintiff’s relatives from “put[ting] money 5 on [his] books.” (Id.) 6 On February 26, 2025, Jones alleges staff harassed a black inmate. (Id. at 9.) Staff 7 also left the “crossover door” open which put “both modules in total[] danger.” (Id.) On 8 February 28, 2025, GBDF staff conducted a surprise “raid” on Plaintiff’s module. (Id. at 9 10.) Inmates, including Jones, were strip searched and forced to “spread [their] cheeks and 10 cough 3 times” while staff “giggle[d].” (Id.) 11 On March 7, 2025, and March 8, 2025, no hot food was served for dinner. (Id. at 12 11.) Instead, inmates received peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. (Id.) On March 16, 13 2025, Plaintiff was subjected to another invasive strip search. (Id.) And on March 23, 14 2025, an inmate with a staph infection was allowed to serve soup to inmates in Plaintiff’s 15 module. (Id.) 16 C. Discussion 17 Jones alleges he was subjected to “cruel and unusual punishment” when he was 18 housed with dangerous cellmates, denied adequate medical

care, and strip searched. (Id. 19 at 3–6.) He also alleges the overall conditions at SDCJ and GBDF are unsanitary, 20 dangerous, and discriminatory. (Id. at 7–11.) 21 Plaintiff has named only the “San Diego Sheriff’s Department” as a Defendant, and 22 not the individual Sheriff’s Department officers. (Id. at 2.) Departments of municipal 23 entities are not “persons” subject to suit under § 1983; therefore, a local law enforcement 24 department (like the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department) is not a proper party. See 25 *Vance v. Cnty. of Santa Clara*, 928 F. Supp. 993, 996 (N.D. Cal. 1996) (“Naming a 26 municipal department as a defendant is not an appropriate means of pleading a § 1983 27 action against a municipality.” (quoting *Stump v. Gates*, 777 F. Supp. 808, 816 (D. Colo. 28 1991), *aff’d*, 986 F.2d 1429 (10th Cir. 1993))); *Powell v. Cook Cnty. Jail*, 814 F. Supp. 1 757, 758 (N.D. Ill. 1993) (“Section 1983 imposes liability on any ‘person’ who violates 2 someone’s constitutional rights ‘under color of law.’ Cook County Jail is not a ‘person.’”). 3 The term “persons” under § 1983 encompasses state and local officials sued in their 4 individual capacities, private individuals and entities which act under color of state law, as 5 well as local governmental entities. *Vance*, 928 F. Supp. at 995–96. However, the Sheriff’s 6 Department, as a department or subdivision of the County of San Diego, is not a “person” 7 subject to suit under § 1983. See, e.g., *United States v. Kama*, 394 F.3d 1236, 1239 (9th 8 Cir. 2005) (“[M]unicipal police departments and bureaus are generally not considered 9 ‘persons’ within the meaning of [section] 1983.”); *Rodriguez v. Cnty. of Contra Costa*, No. 10 C 13-02516 SBA, 2013 WL 5946112 at *3 (N.D. Cal. Nov. 1, 2013) (citing *Hervey v. 11 Estes*, 65 F.3d 784, 791 (9th Cir. 1995)) (“Although municipalities, such as cities and 12 counties, are amenable to suit under *Monell* [*v. Dep’t of Social Servs.*, 436 U.S. 658 13 (1978)], sub-departments or bureaus of municipalities, such as the police departments, are 14 not generally considered “persons” within the meaning of § 1983.”); *Nelson v. Cnty. of 15 Sacramento*, 926 F. Supp. 2d 1159, 1170 (E.D. Cal. 2013) (dismissing Sacramento 16 Sheriff’s Department from section 1983 action “with prejudice” because it “is a subdivision 17 of a local government entity,” i.e., Sacramento County). Therefore, Plaintiff cannot pursue 18 claims against the San Diego Sheriff’s Department. See *Boone v. Deutsche Bank Nat’l Tr. 19 Co.*, 2017 WL 117966, at *3 (E.D. Cal. 2017) (“Because the Solano County Sheriff’s 20 Department is not a ‘person’ within the meaning of Section 1983, plaintiffs cannot maintain 21 their claims against it under that statute as a matter of law.”). 22 Furthermore, to the extent Plaintiff intends to assert a claim against the County of 23 San Diego itself, his allegations, as currently pleaded, are also insufficient to state a claim. 24 A local governmental entity, like the County of San Diego, may not be held vicariously 25 liable under section 1983 simply based on the allegedly unconstitutional acts of its 26 employees. See *Board of Cnty. Comm’rs. v. Brown*, 520 U.S. 397, 403 (1997); *Monell v. 27 Dep’t of Social Servs.*, 436 U.S. 658, 691 (1978) (“[A] municipality cannot be held liable 28 solely because it employs a tortfeasor.”); *Jackson v. Barnes*, 749 F.3d 755, 762 (9th Cir. 1 2014). Instead, a municipal entity is liable under section 1983 only if the plaintiff alleges 2 his constitutional injury was caused by employees acting pursuant to the municipality’s 3 policy or custom. *Monell*,

436 U.S. at 691; *Villegas v. Gilroy Garlic Festival Ass’n*, 541 F.3d 950, 964 (9th Cir. 2008). And here, Jones has failed to allege any facts to suggest “the [alleged] constitutional violations were carried out pursuant to County” policy, practice, custom or failure to train. See *AE ex rel. Hernandez v. Cnty. of Tulare*, 666 F.3d 763, 767 (9th Cir. 2012) (stating a Monell claim requires “more than a bare allegation that government officials’ conduct conformed to some unidentified government policy or custom”). Thus, Jones has failed to state a claim against the San Diego Sheriff’s Department or San Diego County and as such, the Complaint is dismissed. See 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A(b). D. Leave to Amend Given Plaintiff’s pro se status, the Court grants him leave to amend his complaint. See *Rosati v. Igbino*, 791 F.3d 1037, 1039 (9th Cir. 2015) (“A district court should not dismiss a pro se complaint without leave to amend unless ‘it is absolutely clear that the deficiencies of the complaint could not be cured by amendment.’”) (quoting *Akhtar v. Mesa*, 698 F.3d 1202, 1212 (9th Cir. 2012)).

IV. CONCLUSION AND ORDER

Accordingly, the Court:

1. GRANTS Plaintiff’s Motion to Proceed IFP (ECF No. 2);
2. DIRECTS the Facility Commander at the George Bailey Detention Facility, or their designee, to collect from Plaintiff’s trust account the \$24.96 initial filing fee assessed, if those funds are available at the time this Order is executed, and forward whatever balance remains of the full \$350 owed in monthly payments in an amount equal to twenty percent (20%) of the preceding month’s income to the Clerk of the Court each time the amount in the account exceeds \$10 pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(2);
3. DIRECTS the Clerk of the Court to serve a copy of this Order on the Facility Commander, George Bailey Detention Facility, 446 Alta Rd. Ste. 5300, San Diego, California, 92158;
4. DISMISSES Plaintiff’s Complaint in its entirety without prejudice for failing to state a claim pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2) and § 1915A(b); and
5. GRANTS Plaintiff sixty (60) days leave from the date of this Order in which to file a First Amended Complaint which cures the deficiencies of pleading noted in this Order. Plaintiff’s Amended Complaint must be complete by itself without reference to his original Complaint. See S.D. Cal. CivLR 15.1; *Hal Roach Studios, Inc. v. Richard Feiner & Co., Inc.*, 896 F.2d 1542, 1546 (9th Cir. 1989) (“[A]n amended pleading supersedes the original.”); *Lacey v. Maricopa Cnty.*, 693 F.3d 896, 928 (9th Cir. 2012) (noting that claims dismissed with leave to amend which are not re-alleged in an amended pleading may be “considered waived if not repleaded.”).

If Plaintiff fails to timely file a First Amended Complaint, the Court will enter a final Order dismissing this civil action based both on failure to state a claim upon which relief be granted pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii) and § 1915A(b)(1), and failure to prosecute in compliance with a court order requiring amendment. See *Lira v. Herrera*, 427 F.3d 1164, 1169 (9th Cir. 2005) (“If a plaintiff does not take advantage of the opportunity to fix his complaint, a district court may convert the dismissal of the complaint into dismissal of the entire action.”).

IT IS SO ORDERED. DATED: August 5, 2025 (yatta Bahan te A Hon. Cynthia Bashant, Chief Judge United States District Court)

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