

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE DISTRICT OF UTAH

Douglas Birkinbine v. M. Carias et al.

Birkinbine · No. 2:25-CV-289-AMA · Decided April 20, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the District of Utah dismissed Douglas Birkinbine's 42 U.S.C. § 1983 action without prejudice for failure to prosecute and failure to comply with a court order requiring an amended complaint. Applying Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 41(b) and the Ehrenhaus factors, the court concluded that dismissal was warranted because Plaintiff had not responded for more than a year, had disregarded court orders, and would not likely respond to lesser sanctions.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the District of Utah
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Ann Marie McIff Allen
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the District of Utah
DECIDED	April 20, 2026
DOCKET	2:25-CV-289-AMA
DISPOSITION	dismissed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	A pro se inmate's 42 U.S.C. § 1983 action was dismissed sua sponte without prejudice under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 41(b) for failure to prosecute and failure to comply with a court order requiring an amended complaint.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Dismissal for failure to prosecute under Rule 41(b) is discretionary. When dismissal without prejudice would effectively operate as a dismissal with prejudice because the statute of limitations has expired, the court considers the Ehrenhaus factors and weighs them against the judicial system's preference for decisions on the merits.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unpublished district-court memorandum decision; persuasive authority only and not binding precedent outside the case.
PARTIES	Douglas Birkinbine v. M. Carias et al.

TOPICS

- civil procedure
- sanctions
- prisoners rights
- section 1983

PRACTICE AREAS

civil procedure

civil rights

prisoner litigation

sanctions

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the court may sua sponte dismiss a civil action for failure to prosecute and failure to comply with a court order under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 41(b).
2. Whether dismissal was warranted under the Ehrenhaus factors where Plaintiff failed to respond to the court's order and the dismissal could effectively operate as a dismissal with prejudice because of the statute of limitations.
3. Whether a sanction less severe than dismissal would be effective.

HOLDINGS

1. A federal district court may sua sponte dismiss an action under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 41(b) when the plaintiff fails to prosecute or comply with a court order.
2. Dismissal was appropriate because the relevant Ehrenhaus factors supported dismissal: Plaintiff's neglect caused prejudice through delay, interfered with the judicial process, was attributable to Plaintiff, occurred despite warnings, and could not be effectively addressed through lesser sanctions.
3. A dismissal nominally without prejudice may be treated as effectively with prejudice when the statute of limitations has expired on the dismissed claims, requiring consideration of the Ehrenhaus factors.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 41(b) allows involuntary dismissal of an action "[i]f the plaintiff fails to prosecute or to comply with . . . a court order."" (Analysis)

"[F]ailure to respond to court orders cannot be ignored."" (Analysis, Factor 2)

"The federal courts are not a playground for the petulant or absent-minded; our rules and orders exist, in part, to ensure that the administration of justice occurs in a manner that most efficiently utilizes limited judicial resources." (Analysis, Factor 5)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Douglas Birkinbine, an inmate at Utah State Correctional Facility, filed a pro se federal civil-rights action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. The court ordered him to file an amended complaint curing identified deficiencies within ninety days and warned that failure to comply would result in dismissal without further notice. Plaintiff did not file the required amended complaint or otherwise communicate with the court for more than a year after initiating the action.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Plaintiff filed a federal civil-rights complaint on April 14, 2025. After the court ordered him on December 23, 2025, to file an amended complaint curing specified deficiencies within ninety days, Plaintiff did not respond or

otherwise communicate with the court. The court applied the Ehrenhaus factors and dismissed the action without prejudice.

DISPOSITION

dismissed

CASES CITED

- Olsen v. Mapes, 333 F.3d 1199, 1204 n.3 (10th Cir. 2003)
- Link v. Wabash R.R. Co., 370 U.S. 626, 630
- Bills v. United States, 857 F.2d 1404, 1405 (10th Cir. 1988)
- Nasious v. Two Unknown B.I.C.E. Agents at Arapahoe County Justice Ctr., 492 F.3d 1158, 1162 (10th Cir. 2007)
- Gocolay v. N.M. Fed. Sav. & Loan Ass'n, 968 F.2d 1017, 1021 (10th Cir. 1992)
- Ehrenhaus v. Reynolds, 965 F.2d 916, 920 n.3, 921 (10th Cir. 1992)
- DeBardeleben v. Quinlan, 937 F.2d 502, 504 (10th Cir. 1991)
- Lee v. Max Int'l, LLC, 638 F.3d 1318, 1323 (10th Cir. 2011)
- Chavez v. City of Albuquerque, 402 F.3d 1039, 1044 (10th Cir. 2005)
- Archibeque v. Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Ry. Co., 70 F.3d 1172, 1174 (10th Cir. 1995)
- Faircloth v. Hickenlooper, 758 F. App'x 659, 662-63 (10th Cir. 2019)
- Jones v. Thompson, 996 F.2d 261, 264-65 (10th Cir. 1993)
- Auto-Owners Ins. Co. v. Summit Park Townhome Ass'n, 886 F.3d 852, 860 (10th Cir. 2018)
- Riviera Drilling & Exploration Co. v. Gunnison Energy Corp., 412 F. App'x 89, 93 (10th Cir. 2011)
- Villecco v. Vail Resorts, Inc., 707 F. App'x 531, 533-35 (10th Cir. 2017)
- Banks v. Katzenmeyer, 680 F. App'x 721, 724 (10th Cir. 2017)
- Taylor v. Safeway, Inc., 116 F. App'x 976, 977 (10th Cir. 2004)
- Killen v. Reed & Carnick, No. 95-4196, 1997 U.S. App. LEXIS 430, at *4 (10th Cir. Jan. 9, 1997)
- Davis v. Miller, 571 F.3d 1058, 1062 (10th Cir. 2009)
- Cosby v. Meadors, 351 F.3d 1324, 1326-27 (10th Cir. 2003)
- Lynn v. Roberts, No. 01-cv-3422-MLB, 2006 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 72562, at *7 (D. Kan. Oct. 4, 2006)
- Kalkhorst v. Medtronic, Inc., No. 18-cv-580-KLM, 2018 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 215598, at *8-9, *12-13 (D. Colo. Dec. 19, 2019)
- Estate of Strong v. City of Northglen, No. 1:17-cv-1276-WJM-SKC, 2018 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 211095, at *10 (D. Colo. Dec. 14, 2018)
- Stanko v. Davis, 335 F. App'x 744, 747 (10th Cir. 2009)
- Theede v. U.S. Dep't of Labor, 172 F.3d 1262, 1265 (10th Cir. 1999)
- O'Neil v. Burton Group, 559 F. App'x 719, 722 (10th Cir. 2014)
- United States ex rel. Jimenez v. Health Net, Inc., 400 F.3d 853, 855-56 (10th Cir. 2005)

- Callahan v. Communications Graphics, Inc., 657 F. App'x 739, 743 (10th Cir. 2016)
- Smith v. McKune, 345 F. App'x 317, 320 (10th Cir. 2009)
- Green v. Dorrell, 969 F.2d 915, 917 (10th Cir. 1992)
- Meade v. Grubbs, 841 F.2d 1512, 1518 n.6, 1521-22 (10th Cir. 1988)

OPINION

THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT DISTRICT OF UTAH DOUGLAS BIRKINBINE, Plaintiff, MEMORANDUM DECISION & DISMISSAL ORDER v. Case No. 2:25-CV-289-AMA M. CARIAS et al., District Judge Ann Marie McIff Allen Defendants. Plaintiff's action is dismissed for failure to prosecute. BACKGROUND As an inmate at Utah State Correctional Facility (USCF), Plaintiff filed a federal civil- rights action, 42 U.S.C.S. § 1983 (2026).

Dkt. No. 1. On December 23, 2025, the Court ordered Plaintiff to "within ninety days cure the Complaint's deficiencies noted above by filing a document entitled, 'Amended Complaint,' that does not refer to or include any other document." Dkt. No. 10. Plaintiff has not responded, nor has he been heard from directly since he filed this action on April 14, 2025--over one year ago.¹ Dkt.

Nos. 1-3. ANALYSIS Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 41(b) allows involuntary dismissal of an action "[i]f the plaintiff fails to prosecute or to comply with... a court order." Fed. R. Civ. P. 41(b). The Court may dismiss actions sua sponte for failure to prosecute. Olsen v. Mapes, 333 F.3d 1199, 1204 n.3 ¹The financial certificate and partial filing fees received on April 17, 2025 through August 28, 2025, were sent by USCF's inmate account office.

Dkt. Nos. 5-9. (10th Cir. 2003) (stating, though Rule 41(b) requires defendant file motion to dismiss, Rule has long been construed to let courts dismiss actions sua sponte when plaintiff fails to prosecute or comply with orders); see also Link v. Wabash R.R. Co., 370 U.S. 626, 630 (stating court has inherent authority to clear "calendar[] of cases that have remained dormant because of the inaction or dilatoriness of the parties seeking relief"); Bills v. United States, 857 F.2d 1404, 1405 (10th Cir.

1988) (recognizing dismissal for failure to prosecute as "standard" way to clear "deadwood from the courts' calendars" when prolonged and unexcused delay by plaintiff). Generally, "a district court may, without abusing its discretion, [dismiss a case without prejudice] without attention to any particular procedures." Nasious v. Two Unknown B.I.C.E. Agents at Araphoe County Justice Ctr., 492 F.3d 1158, 1162 (10th Cir.

2007). But, a dismissal without prejudice is effectively a dismissal with prejudice if the statute of limitations has expired on the dismissed claims. Gocolay v. N.M. Fed. Sav. & Loan Ass'n, 968 F.2d 1017, 1021 (10th Cir. 1992).

For purposes of this Order only, the Court assumes the statute of limitations has expired on Plaintiff's claims if they were to be refiled after dismissal. When the dismissal is effectively with prejudice, this Court applies the factors from *Ehrenhaus v. Reynolds*, 965 F.2d 916 (10th Cir. 1992)--namely, "(1) the degree of actual prejudice to [Defendant]"; (2) "the amount of interference with the judicial process"; (3) the litigant's culpability; (4) whether the court warned the noncomplying litigant that dismissal of the action was a likely sanction; and (5) "the efficacy of lesser sanctions."

Id. at 921 (internal quotation marks omitted). Dismissal with prejudice is proper only when these factors outweigh the judicial system's strong preference to decide cases on the merits. *DeBardeleben v. Quinlan*, 937 F.2d 502, 504 (10th Cir. 1991).

The *Ehrenhaus* factors are not "a rigid test; rather, they represent criteria for the district court to consider [before] imposing dismissal as a sanction." *Ehrenhaus*, 965 F.2d at 921; see also *Lee v. Max Int'l, LLC*, 638 F.3d 1318, 1323 (10th Cir. 2011) ("The *Ehrenhaus* factors are simply a non-exclusive list of sometimes-helpful 'criteria' or guide posts the district court may wish to 'consider' in the exercise of what must always be a discretionary function."); *Chavez v. City of Albuquerque*, 402 F.3d 1039, 1044 (10th Cir.

2005) (describing *Ehrenhaus* factors as "not exhaustive, nor... equiponderant"); *Archibeque v. Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Ry. Co.*, 70 F.3d 1172, 1174 (10th Cir. 1995) ("[D]etermining the correct sanction is a fact specific inquiry that the district court is in the best position to make.").

The Court now considers the factors as follows: Factor 1: Degree of actual prejudice to Defendant. Prejudice may be inferred from delay, uncertainty, and rising attorney's fees. *Faircloth v. Hickenlooper*, 758 F. App'x 659, 662 (10th Cir. 2018) (unpublished); *Jones v. Thompson*, 996 F.2d 261, 264 (10th Cir. 1993); see also *Auto-Owners Ins. Co. v. Summit Park Townhome Ass'n*, 886 F.3d 852, 860 (10th Cir.

2018) (concluding substantial prejudice when plaintiff "sparked months of litigation" and defendants "wasted eight months of litigation"); *Riviera Drilling & Exploration Co. v. Gunnison Energy Corp.*, 412 F. App'x 89, 93 (10th Cir. 2011) (unpublished) (approving district court's observation that "delay would 'prolong for the defendants the substantial uncertainty faced by all parties pending litigation'" (citation omitted)).

Reviewing this case's docket, the Court concludes that Plaintiff's neglect does not overtly prejudice any defendants, except that, in general, passage of time can weaken evidentiary support for a position. This factor weighs in favor of dismissal. Factor 2: Amount of interference with judicial process.

In *Jones*, the Tenth Circuit concluded that Plaintiff had significantly interfered with the judicial process when he failed to answer a show-cause order or join a telephone conference. *Jones*, 996

F.2d at 265. Though Jones later argued that the district court could have abated the suit and revisited the status in three to six months, the court noted that abeyance would have delayed the proceedings for the other parties and the court.

Id. The court said, "In similar circumstances, we have held that a district court could find interference with the judicial process when the plaintiff 'repeatedly ignore[s] court orders and thereby hinder[s] the court's management of its docket and its efforts to avoid unnecessary burdens on the court and the opposing party.'" Id. (citation omitted). Meanwhile, in *Villecco*, the Tenth Circuit determined that plaintiff greatly interfered "with the judicial process by failing to provide the court with a current mailing address or an address that he regularly checked; respond to discovery requests; appear at his deposition; list any fact witnesses or otherwise comply with the court's Initial Pretrial Order, or respond to the Defendants' Motion to Dismiss."

Villecco v. Vail Resorts, Inc., 707 F. App'x 531, 533 (10th Cir. 2017); see also *Banks v. Katzenmeyer*, 680 F. App'x 721, 724 (10th Cir. 2017) (unpublished) ("[H]e did not (1) respond to the order to show cause or (2) notify the court of his change of address as required by the local rules, even though his past actions show he was aware of the requirement."); *Taylor v. Safeway, Inc.*, 116 F. App'x 976, 977 (10th Cir.

2004) (dismissing under *Ehrenhaus* when "judicial process essentially ground to a halt when [Plaintiff] refused to respond to either the defendant[s] filings] or the district court's orders"); *Killen v. Reed & Carnick*, No. 95-4196, 1997 U.S. App. LEXIS 430, at *4 (10th Cir. Jan. 9, 1997) (unpublished) ("Plaintiff's willful failure to comply with the orders of the district court flouted the court's authority and interfered with the judicial process."

(Internal quotation marks and citation omitted.)). "[F]ailure to respond to court orders cannot be ignored." *Davis v. Miller*, 571 F.3d 1058, 1062 (10th Cir. 2009). Likewise here, Plaintiff's failure to prosecute this case--by not (a) responding to the Court's order and (b) not further updating Plaintiff's address if need be--necessarily interferes with effective administration of justice.

Dkt. No. 10. The issue here "is respect for the judicial process and the law." See *Cosby v. Meadors*, 351 F.3d 1324, 1326-27 (10th Cir. 2003). Plaintiff's failure to comply with an order, and possibly to maintain a current address on the docket, disrespects the Court and the judicial process. Plaintiff's neglect has caused the Court and staff to spend unnecessary time and effort.

The Court's frequent review of the docket and preparation of orders to move this case along have increased the Court's workload and diverted its attention from other matters in which parties have met their duties and deserve prompt resolution of their issues. "This order is a perfect example, demonstrating the substantial time and expense required to perform the legal research, analysis, and writing to craft this document."

Lynn v. Roberts, No. 01-cv-3422-MLB, 2006 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 72562, at *7 (D. Kan. Oct. 4, 2006). This factor weighs in favor of dismissal. See Kalkhorst v. Medtronic, Inc., No. 18-cv- 580-KLM, 2018 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 215598, at *8-9 (D. Colo. Dec. 19, 2019); see also Estate of Strong v. City of Northglen, No. 1:17-cv-1276-WJM-SKC, 2018 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 211095, at *10 (D.

Colo. Dec. 14, 2018) (report & recommendation) ("It is hard to fathom how failing to respond to orders of the federal district court would not interfere with the judicial process." (Emphasis in original.)). Factor 3: Litigant's culpability. Proof of culpability may be drawn from Plaintiff's failure to be in touch with the Court and to respond to its order, (ECF No. 14).

See Villecco, 707 F. App'x at 534; see also Faircloth, 758 F. App'x at 662-63 (finding culpability when plaintiff solely responsible for not updating address and responding to show-cause order); Stanko v. Davis, 335 F. App'x 744, 747 (10th Cir. 2009) (unpublished) ("For at least seven months, Stanko failed to follow this order.

The district court ordered Stanko to show cause for this failure. Stanko made no effort to explain his failure regarding those seven months."); Theede v. U.S. Dep't of Labor, 172 F.3d 1262, 1265 (10th Cir. 1999) (stating plaintiff at fault for inability to receive court filings based on failure to notify court of correct address). Earlier in this case, Plaintiff showed ability to file a Complaint.

Dkt. No. 1. Still, over one year has now passed since the Court last heard from Plaintiff here, despite the Court's recent order requiring response. Dkt. Nos. 1-3, 10. This factor weighs in favor of dismissal. Factor 4: Whether Court warned noncomplying litigant that dismissal was likely sanction.

In Faircloth, the court twice warned plaintiff that failure to comply could result in dismissal. Faircloth, 758 F. App'x at 662. On appeal, when plaintiff argued he did not get these warnings, the Tenth Circuit stated, "But he could have received the warnings had he complied with the local rule requiring him to update his address.

Because he did not, the court's only option was to mail documents to him at his last known address. These mailings constituted effective service [under Fed. R. Civ. P. 5(b)(2)(C)]." Id; see also O'Neil v. Burton Grp., 559 F. App'x 719, 722 (10th Cir. 2014) (unpublished) (affirming dismissal with prejudice for failure to appear especially after party was repeatedly warned of consequences).

Here, on December 23, 2025, the Court cautioned, "If Plaintiff fails to timely cure the above deficiencies according to this Order's instructions, this action will be dismissed without further notice." Dkt. No. 10. The other order in this case also reflects the Court's admonition that failure to comply with orders would result in case dismissal. Dkt. No. 4.

There can be no mistaking the Court's intentions. Factor 5: Efficacy of lesser sanctions. Also in Faircloth, the district court had decided that no lesser sanction than dismissal could be effective when "[t]he court had been unable to receive a response from Mr. Faircloth and had no way of learning where Mr. Faircloth was or when he would disclose his new address."

Faircloth, 758 F. App'x at 662. Due to this uncertainty, "the court reasonably concluded that dismissal was necessary." *Id.* And in Villeco, dismissal was approved when, "given Villecco's failure to communicate, to respond to any notices or the Motion to Dismiss, or to comply with any deadlines, the [district] court found no lesser sanction than dismissal would be effective."

Villecco, 707 F. App'x at 533. The Tenth Circuit said that "[a] lesser sanction would be ineffective because a stay would not have a 'real impact on [Plaintiff] in encouraging responsiveness.'" *Id.* at 535; see also *O'Neil v. Burton Grp.*, 559 F. App'x 719, 722 (10th Cir. 2014) (unpublished) ("[S]imply because lesser sanctions were available does not mean that the court was obligated to apply them.").

In yet another case, the Tenth Circuit stated that though "dismissal should be imposed only after careful exercise of judicial discretion," it is an appropriate disposition against a party who disregards court orders and fails to proceed as required by court rules.... Dismissal of the [case] is a strong sanction to be sure, but it is no trifling matter for [a party] to abuse our office by disappearing and failing to meet our deadlines.

The federal courts are not a playground for the petulant or absent-minded; our rules and orders exist, in part, to ensure that the administration of justice occurs in a manner that most efficiently utilizes limited judicial resources. *United States ex rel. Jimenez v. Health Net, Inc.*, 400 F.3d 853, 855, 856 (10th Cir. 2005). It is true that, for a pro se party, "the court should carefully assess whether it might... impose some sanction other than dismissal, so that the party does not unknowingly lose its right of access to the courts because of a technical violation."

Ehrenhaus, 965 F.2d at 920 n.3; see also *Callahan v. Commun. Graphics, Inc.*, 657 F. App'x 739, 743 (10th Cir. 2016) (unpublished) ("The Court has been beyond lenient with Plaintiff throughout these proceedings based on his pro se status.") (Citation omitted.)).

On the other hand, "[m]onetary sanctions are meaningless to a plaintiff who has been allowed to proceed in forma pauperis." *Smith v. McKune*, 345 F. App'x 317, 320 (10th Cir. 2009) (unpublished); cf. *Riviera Drilling & Exploration Co. v. Gunnison Energy Corp.*, 412 F. App'x 89, 93 (10th Cir. 2011) (unpublished) ("Because Riviera had filed for bankruptcy, a financial sanction was out of the question.").

Again, dismissal is a drastic sanction, but the Tenth Circuit has "repeatedly upheld dismissals in situations where the parties themselves neglected their cases or refused to obey court orders." *Green v. Dorrell*, 969 F.2d 915, 917 (10th Cir. 1992). Dismissal is warranted when there is a

persistent failure to prosecute the complaint. See *Meade v. Grubbs*, 841 F.2d 1512, 1518 n.6, 1521-22 (10th Cir.

1988). Applying these principles, the Court concludes that no sanction less than dismissal would work here. First, though Plaintiff is pro se, Plaintiff is not excused from neglect. See *Green*, 969 F.2d at 917. Second, Plaintiff has neglected this case so thoroughly that the Court doubts monetary or evidentiary sanctions would be effective (even if such sanctions could be motivating for an indigent, pro se prisoner).

"It is apparent that Plaintiff is no longer interested in and/or capable of prosecuting his claims. Under these circumstances, no lesser sanction is warranted and dismissal is the appropriate result." *Kalkhorst*, 2018 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 215598, at *12-13. CONCLUSION Having comprehensively analyzed the *Ehrenhaus* factors against the timeline and Plaintiff's lack of responsiveness here, the Court concludes that dismissal is appropriate.

IT IS THEREFORE ORDERED that this action is DISMISSED without prejudice. DATED this 20th day of April, 2026. BY THE COURT: JUDGE ANN MARIE MCIFF ALLEN United States District Court