

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF
TENNESSEE, NASHVILLE DIVISION

David E. Baker, II v. Williamson County Sheriff's Office, et al.

Baker · No. 3:25-cv-00138 · Decided June 22, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Middle District of Tennessee grants David E. Baker II leave to proceed in forma pauperis but finds that his § 1983 complaint does not state a viable claim. The court concludes that the allegations do not plausibly support failure-to-protect or retaliation claims against the named officials and explains that the Williamson County Sheriff's Office is not a proper § 1983 defendant. The court permits Baker 30 days to file an amended complaint.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Middle District of Tennessee, Nashville Division
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Aleta A. Trauger
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Middle District of Tennessee, Nashville Division
DECIDED	June 22, 2026
DOCKET	3:25-cv-00138
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	A pro se incarcerated plaintiff filed a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 complaint and an application to proceed in forma pauperis. The district court granted pauper status, conducted initial screening under the Prison Litigation Reform Act, found no viable claim, and allowed the plaintiff 30 days to amend.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	On PLRA initial review, the court applied the Rule 12(b)(6) plausibility standard, accepting well-pleaded factual allegations and reasonable inferences as true, liberally construing the pro se complaint, and disregarding legal conclusions and unwarranted factual inferences.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished

TOPICS

[section 1983](#)

[prisoners rights](#)

[pleadings](#)

[motions to dismiss](#)

[civil procedure](#)

PRACTICE AREAS

prisoner civil rights

constitutional litigation

federal civil procedure

pleading and screening

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the complaint plausibly alleged that Deputy Jenkins violated Baker's constitutional rights by failing to protect him from a dangerous cellmate.
2. Whether the complaint plausibly alleged First Amendment retaliation based on Baker's PREA complaint and continued placement in segregation.
3. Whether the Williamson County Sheriff's Office was a proper defendant in a § 1983 action.
4. Whether Baker should be allowed to amend the complaint after the court found that it failed to state a viable claim.

HOLDINGS

1. The complaint did not plausibly allege a failure-to-protect claim because it did not allege that Jenkins knew of a violent history between Baker and the other inmate or knew that the other inmate had a history of sexual violence.
2. The complaint did not plausibly allege retaliation because it failed to establish an adverse action causally connected to Baker's PREA filing.
3. The Williamson County Sheriff's Office was not a proper party to a § 1983 action under the district courts' uniform treatment of police and sheriff's departments in Tennessee.
4. The court permitted Baker to file an amended complaint within 30 days to provide additional factual allegations supporting his claims.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“To plausibly claim that Deputy Jenkins violated the plaintiff’s constitutional rights by failing to protect him from being housed with such a dangerous cellmate, the plaintiff must allege that Jenkins “act[ed] intentionally in a manner that put[] the plaintiff at substantial risk of harm, without taking reasonable steps to abate that risk, and by failing to do so actually cause[d] the plaintiff’s injuries.””

“The plausibility standard ... asks for more than a sheer possibility that a defendant has acted unlawfully”

“In sum, although the Complaint as currently constituted does not assert a viable claim, the court will allow the plaintiff an opportunity to amend in order to provide additional factual allegations in support of his claims.”

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

While detained at the Williamson County Jail, Baker alleged that Deputy Jenkins moved him to a segregation cell with an inmate whom Baker characterized as a violent sexual predator and by whom he claimed to have previously been sexually assaulted. Baker alleged that after he filed a Prison Rape Elimination Act complaint,

Captain Youker and Lieutenant Lindquist kept him in involuntary segregation for approximately 60 days. He claimed emotional distress and sought damages and trauma counseling.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

David E. Baker filed a civil-rights complaint concerning his housing in the Williamson County Jail and sought leave to proceed in forma pauperis. The court granted the IFP application and screened the complaint under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915A and 1915(e)(2). The court concluded that the complaint failed to state a plausible failure-to-protect claim, retaliation claim, or claim against the Williamson County Sheriff's Office, but exercised its discretion to permit amendment rather than dismissing the action immediately.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- Hill v. Lappin, 630 F.3d 468, 470–72, 474 (6th Cir. 2010)
- Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662, 678–79 (2009)
- National Rifle Association of America v. Vullo, 602 U.S. 175, 181 (2024)
- Inner City Contracting, LLC v. Charter Township of Northville, Michigan, 87 F.4th 743, 749 (6th Cir. 2023)
- Erickson v. Pardus, 551 U.S. 89, 94 (2007)
- Wurzelbacher v. Jones-Kelley, 675 F.3d 580, 583 (6th Cir. 2012)
- Carl v. Muskegon County, 763 F.3d 592, 595 (6th Cir. 2014)
- Westmoreland v. Butler County, Kentucky, 29 F.4th 721, 729 (6th Cir. 2022)
- Thaddeus-X v. Blatter, 175 F.3d 378, 394, 398 (6th Cir. 1999) (en banc)
- Hart v. Baugus, No. 3:25-cv-00905, 2026 WL 767462, at *3 (M.D. Tenn. Mar. 18, 2026)
- Herron v. Harrison, 203 F.3d 410, 416 (6th Cir. 2000)
- Dunham-Bey v. Holden, No. 98-1522, 1999 WL 1023730, at *2 (6th Cir. Nov. 5, 1999)
- Hursey v. Anderson, No. 2:15-CV-00145, 2020 WL 6204478, at *3–4 (W.D. Mich. Apr. 27, 2020), report and recommendation adopted, 2020 WL 6196282 (W.D. Mich. Oct. 22, 2020), aff'd, No. 20-2138, 2022 WL 1598142 (6th Cir. Mar. 11, 2022)
- Mathes v. Metropolitan Government of Nashville & Davidson County, No. 3:10-cv-0496, 2010 WL 3341889, at *2–3 (M.D. Tenn. Aug. 25, 2010)
- Matthews v. Jones, 35 F.3d 1046, 1049 (6th Cir. 1994)
- LaFountain v. Harry, 716 F.3d 944, 951 (6th Cir. 2013)

OPINION

Baker

PER CURIAM.

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE

NASHVILLE DIVISION

DAVID E. BAKER, II,)

) Plaintiff,)) v.) No. 3:25-cv-00138) Judge Trauger

WILLIAMSON COUNTY)

SHERIFF'S OFFICE, et al.,)) Defendants.)

MEMORANDUM OPINION AND ORDER

Plaintiff David Baker, II, while he was incarcerated in the Williamson County Jail,¹ filed a civil rights complaint under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 (Doc. No. 1) and an application for leave to proceed in forma pauperis (IFP). (Doc. No. 2.) The case is before the court for ruling on the plaintiff's IFP application and for initial review of the Complaint under the Prison Litigation Reform Act (PLRA), 28 U.S.C. § 1915A.

I. PAUPER STATUS

Subject to certain statutory requirements, see 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(1)–(2), (g), a prisoner bringing a civil action may be permitted to proceed as a pauper, without prepaying the \$405 filing fee. Because the plaintiff's IFP application complies with the applicable statutory requirements and demonstrates that he lacked the funds to prepay the entire filing fee, that IFP application (Doc. No. 2) is GRANTED. 1 On March 13, 2026, the plaintiff notified the court that he had been released from custody. (Doc. No. 8.)

II. INITIAL REVIEW

A. Legal Standard In cases filed by prisoners, the court must conduct an initial screening and “identify cognizable claims or dismiss the complaint, or any portion of the complaint, if the complaint” or any portion of it is facially frivolous or malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief against a defendant who is immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. § 1915A; see also 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c). Review under the same criteria is also authorized under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2) when the prisoner proceeds IFP. To determine whether the Complaint states a claim upon which relief may be granted, the court reviews for whether it alleges sufficient facts “to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face,” such that it would survive a motion to dismiss under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6). *Hill v. Lappin*, 630 F.3d 468, 470–71 (6th Cir. 2010) (quoting *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009)). At this stage, “the Court assumes the truth of ‘well-pleaded factual allegations’ and ‘reasonable inference[s]’ therefrom,” *Nat’l Rifle Ass’n of Am. v. Vullo*, 602 U.S. 175, 181

(2024) (quoting *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678–79), but is “not required to accept legal conclusions or unwarranted factual inferences as true.” *Inner City Contracting, LLC v. Charter Twp. of Northville, Michigan*, 87 F.4th 743, 749 (6th Cir. 2023) (citation omitted). The court must afford the pro se Complaint a liberal construction, *Erickson v. Pardus*, 551 U.S. 89, 94 (2007), while viewing it in the light most favorable to the plaintiff. *Inner City*, supra. The plaintiff filed the Complaint under Section 1983, which authorizes a federal action against any person who, “under

color of state law, deprives [another] person of rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution or conferred by federal statute.” *Wurzelbacher v. Jones- Kelley*, 675 F.3d 580, 583 (6th Cir. 2012) (citations omitted); 42 U.S.C. § 1983. The Complaint must therefore plausibly allege (1) a deprivation of a constitutional or other federal right, and (2) that the deprivation was caused by a “state actor.” *Carl v. Muskegon Cnty.*, 763 F.3d 592, 595 (6th Cir. 2014).

B. Allegations of the Complaint The Complaint alleges that, on December 24, 2024, Williamson County Sheriff’s Deputy Jenkins moved the plaintiff, a pretrial detainee, to a segregation pod and cell within the Jail, “forc[ing] [him] into a cell with a violent sexual predator [and] homosexual.” (Doc. No. 1 at 4, 5, 7.) This put the plaintiff “into a sexually compromised position of being raped.” (Id. at 4.) He was “in fear for [his] life” and “refused to allow this inmate [to] rape [him] again.” (Id. at 5.) After filing a complaint under the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) and “refusing to be raped by an inmate with HIV,” the plaintiff spent 60 days in “involuntary segregation,” which he claims was a punishment imposed by Captain Youker and Lt. Lindquist. (Id. at 4, 5.) He suffered “mental anguish [that] has caused emotional distress requiring medical treatment,” and claims a deteriorated ability to re-enter society “after the trauma of being raped and contracting HIV/AIDS.” (Id. at 5.) He claims cruel and unusual punishment (id. at 3) and requests the following relief: “\$100,000.00 in damages for intentional infliction of emotional distress [and] the ability to seek trauma counseling.” (Id. at 5.)

C. Analysis Although the Complaint’s allegations are sparse and not entirely clear, they can be construed (favorably to the plaintiff) to support the inference that the plaintiff was made to share a segregation cell with an inmate by whom he had previously been sexually assaulted. To plausibly claim that Deputy Jenkins violated his constitutional rights by failing to protect him from being housed with such a dangerous cellmate, the plaintiff must allege that Jenkins “act[ed] intentionally in a manner that put[] the plaintiff at substantial risk of harm, without taking reasonable steps to abate that risk, and by failing to do so actually cause[d] the plaintiff’s injuries.” *Westmoreland v. Butler Cnty., Kentucky*, 29 F.4th 721, 729 (6th Cir. 2022). The Complaint, however, does not allege that Deputy Jenkins was previously aware of any violent history between the two inmates, or that he knew the other inmate had a history of perpetrating sexual violence. Therefore, there are no grounds for a plausible claim that Jenkins acted intentionally to put the plaintiff at risk during the cell transfer. While Jenkins is alleged to have “forced” the plaintiff into the newly assigned cell (Doc. No. 1 at 5), this lone allegation does not make it plausible, rather than merely possible, that Jenkins might be liable on a failure-to-protect theory. See *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678 (“The plausibility standard ... asks for more than a sheer possibility that a defendant has acted unlawfully”; it requires facts that are more than “merely consistent with a defendant’s liability”) (citation and internal quotation marks omitted). Accordingly, no viable claim is stated against Jenkins. The plaintiff next alleges that, after filing his PREA complaint “for fear of being raped again” (Doc. No. 1 at 6), he was “left in involuntary segregation” (id. at 17) for sixty days by Captain Youker and Lt. Lindquist. (Id. at 4, 5.) The court liberally construes this allegation as an attempt to claim retaliation under the First

Amendment. “To establish such a claim, a prisoner must prove that (1) he engaged in protected conduct, (2) the defendant took an adverse action that is capable of deterring a person of ‘ordinary firmness from continuing to engage in that conduct,’ and (3) ‘the adverse action was motivated at least in part by the [prisoner’s] protected conduct.’” *Hill v. Lappin*, 630 F.3d 468, 472 (6th Cir. 2010) (quoting *Thaddeus-X v. Blatter*, 175 F.3d 378, 394, 398 (6th Cir.1999) (en banc)). This court presumes the filing of a complaint under PREA to be protected conduct, “so long as the [filing] is not frivolous.” *Hart v. Baugus*, No. 3:25-cv-00905, 2026 WL 767462, at *3 (M.D. Tenn. Mar. 18, 2026) (citing *Gennoe v. Washburn*, No. 3:19-cv-00478, 2019 WL 5693929, at *6 (M.D. Tenn. Nov. 4, 2019)). However, the Complaint’s allegations do not plausibly establish the adverse action or causal connection elements of a retaliation claim. Responding to protected conduct by moving an inmate to segregated housing, with its attendant restrictions on inmate life compared to general-population housing, has long been recognized as sufficiently adverse to satisfy the second element of a retaliation claim. *Hill*, 630 F.3d at 474 (citing *Herron v. Harrison*, 203 F.3d 410, 416 (6th Cir. 2000), and *Dunham-Bey v. Holden*, No. 98–1522, 1999 WL 1023730, at *2 (6th Cir. Nov. 5, 1999)). However, the plaintiff in this case was moved to segregated housing before filing his PREA grievance, for reasons not revealed in the Complaint. (See Doc. No. 1 at 7 (stating that the cell the plaintiff was “forced [to share] with a sexual predator” was in “segregation housing”).) It is thus not reasonable to infer that Youker and Lindquist’s decision to keep the plaintiff in segregation was an adverse action causally connected to his PREA filing, rather than merely an action related to the reason for his original placement in segregation. Cf. *Hursey v. Anderson*, No. 2:15-CV-00145, 2020 WL 6204478, at *3–4 (W.D. Mich. Apr. 27, 2020), report and recommendation adopted, 2020 WL 6196282 (W.D. Mich. Oct. 22, 2020), *aff’d*, No. 20-2138, 2022 WL 1598142 (6th Cir. Mar. 11, 2022) (finding retaliation claim unsupported where “the record does not establish that [defendant] took some adverse action against [plaintiff] due to some prior protected conduct”) (emphasis added). The Complaint thus fails to plead a plausible retaliation claim. Finally, although the Williamson County Sheriff’s Office is named in the Complaint’s caption (Doc. No. 1 at 1), it is not identified as a defendant in the appropriate section of the Complaint form. (See *id.* at 2–3.) Even if it had been, “federal district courts in Tennessee have frequently and uniformly held that police departments and sheriff’s departments are not proper parties to a § 1983 suit.” *Mathes v. Metro. Gov’t of Nashville & Davidson Cnty.*, No. 3:10-cv-0496, 2010 WL 3341889, at *2—3 (M.D. Tenn. Aug. 25, 2010) (citing *Matthews v. Jones*, 35 F.3d 1046, 1049 (6th Cir. 1994)). In sum, the sparse allegations of the Complaint are insufficient to state any viable claim against any defendant named therein. Nevertheless, the court in its discretion may allow the plaintiff to file an amended complaint in order to provide additional factual support for his claims. See *LaFountain v. Harry*, 716 F.3d 944, 951 (6th Cir. 2013) (holding “that under Rule 15(a) a district court can allow a plaintiff to amend his complaint even when the complaint is subject to dismissal under the PLRA”). The court will exercise that discretion in this case. Ill. CONCLUSION In sum, although the Complaint as currently constituted does not assert a

viable claim, the court will allow the plaintiff an opportunity to amend in order to provide additional factual allegations in support of his claims. The plaintiff **MUST** file an Amended Complaint that complies with the instructions in this order within 30 DAYS of the entry of the order. The Clerk is **DIRECTED** to provide the plaintiff with a form for filing a civil rights complaint (Pro Se Form 14). The plaintiff is cautioned that failure to file an Amended Complaint within 30 days (or to seek an extension of this deadline before it expires), or failure to keep the court apprised of his current address, may result in the dismissal of this case for failure to prosecute and failure to comply with the court's order. It is so **ORDERED**. Uf Mil bag — United States District Judge