

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

**Brenda Gaines Hunter v. Crystal Noel Carter, Mark Hawk,
Permanente Medical Group, Kaiser Foundation Health Plan, Inc.,
and Kaiser Foundation Hospital**

Hunter v. Carter · No. No. 2:25-cv-2076 DAD AC PS · Decided December 23, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California ruled on the pro se plaintiff’s motions concerning electronic filing, waiver of post-filing litigation costs, and service on defendant Mark Hawk. The court denied permission to file electronically and denied the requested cost waiver, but granted electronic service, extended the service deadline to February 24, 2026, and permitted substitute service at Hawk’s place of employment. The court denied service through counsel, declined to direct the U.S. Marshals to serve Hawk, and denied without prejudice the request to shift service costs to him.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Allison Claire
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
DECIDED	December 23, 2025
DOCKET	No. 2:25-cv-2076 DAD AC PS
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Pro se plaintiff moved for permission to file documents electronically, relief from post-filing litigation costs, and an extension of time and related relief concerning service on defendant Mark Hawk. The magistrate judge denied some requests, granted some in part, and granted a sixty-day extension for service.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The order applied the governing Federal Rules of Civil Procedure and statutes to the requested procedural relief; no separate appellate standard of review was stated.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Nonprecedential district-court order; precedential status is unknown in the source metadata.

TOPICS

service of process costs civil procedure pleadings

PRACTICE AREAS

Civil procedure Federal courts Service of process In forma pauperis procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether plaintiff should be permitted to file future documents electronically as a pro se litigant.
2. Whether 28 U.S.C. § 1915 authorizes waiver of post-filing litigation costs after the filing fee has been paid.
3. Whether plaintiff established good cause for extending the time to serve defendant Mark Hawk.
4. Whether plaintiff could serve Mark Hawk through attorney Bryce Gray.
5. Whether plaintiff could use substitute service at Mark Hawk's place of employment under California law.
6. Whether the United States Marshals Service should be ordered to serve Mark Hawk.
7. Whether service costs should be shifted to Mark Hawk because he did not waive service.

HOLDINGS

1. A pro se litigant may electronically file documents only with court permission or as authorized by local rule. Because plaintiff did not provide the required stipulation, defendant signatures, or an adequate case-specific justification, her request to electronically file documents was denied, although electronic service was permitted.
2. 28 U.S.C. § 1915 does not authorize waiver of post-filing litigation fees and costs, including subpoena, deposition, transcript, records, copying, and document-service costs. Plaintiff's motion for relief from those costs was denied.
3. Plaintiff established good cause for an extension because she reasonably relied for most of the ninety-day service period on Gray's representation that he would obtain authority to waive service for all defendants, and Gray ultimately obtained such authority for four of the five defendants. The service deadline was extended by sixty days, to February 24, 2026.
4. Plaintiff could not serve Mark Hawk by serving Bryce Gray because the record did not establish that Gray was an agent authorized by appointment or law to accept service for Hawk. The request was denied.
5. Plaintiff may use substitute service on Mark Hawk's place of employment if she complies with California Code of Civil Procedure § 415.20(b). To the extent court authorization was necessary, the court granted it.
6. The court declined to order the United States Marshals Service to serve Mark Hawk because plaintiff was not proceeding in forma pauperis and had not otherwise shown entitlement to marshal service.

7. The request to shift service costs to Mark Hawk was denied without prejudice because cost shifting under Rule 4(d)(2) depends on a showing that Hawk lacked good cause for refusing to waive service, and Hawk had not yet had an opportunity to present his reasons.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“The Supreme Court has held that “the expenditure of public funds [on behalf of an indigent litigant] is proper only when authorized by Congress” rather than whenever Congress has not expressly prohibited it.” (at 2)

“Critically, this means plaintiff does not need the court’s leave to serve someone through substitute service as permitted by California law.” (at 6)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Plaintiff proceeded pro se and paid the filing fee after initially seeking in forma pauperis status. She asserted that she could not afford subpoena, deposition, transcript, records, and other litigation costs. Plaintiff also described unsuccessful attempts to personally serve Mark Hawk and relied for more than two months on attorney Bryce Gray's representation that he would likely obtain authority to accept or waive service for all defendants, although Gray ultimately returned waivers for only four defendants.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Plaintiff filed this civil-rights action and initially sought leave to proceed in forma pauperis, but paid the filing fee, mooted that request. Four of five defendants returned executed waivers of service; defendant Mark Hawk did not. Plaintiff then filed the motions addressed in this order.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- United States v. MacCollom, 426 U.S. 317, 321 (1976)
- Tedder v. Odel, 890 F.2d 210, 211-12 (9th Cir. 1989)
- Beckely v. Raith, No. C 13-02707 WHA, 2013 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 147621, 2013 WL 5568237 (N.D. Cal. Oct. 9, 2013)
- Porter v. Department of Treasury, 564 F.3d 176, 180 n.3 (3d Cir. 2009)
- Khokhar v. J C K American Transport, Case No. EDCV 24-01529-MWF, 2025 WL 2427976, at *3, 2025 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 195026, at *3 (C.D. Cal. July 29, 2025)

OPINION

Carter

PER CURIAM.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
9 FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

10

11 BRENDA GAINES HUNTER, No. 2:25-cv-2076 DAD AC PS

12 Plaintiff, 13 v. ORDER

14 CRYSTAL NOEL CARTER, MARK

HAWK, PERMANENTE MEDICAL

15 GROUP, KAISER FOUNDATION

HEALTH PLAN, INC., and KAISER

16 FOUNDATION HOSPITAL,

17 Defendants. 18

19 Plaintiff is proceeding in this action pro se. This matter was accordingly referred to the 20 undersigned by E.D. Cal. 302(c)(21). Plaintiff initially requested leave to proceed in forma 21 pauperis (“IFP”) (ECF Nos. 2-3, 6), but the request was mooted upon plaintiff’s payment of the 22 filing fee. See 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(1). Plaintiff now moves for (1) leave to electronically file all 23 future documents in this action, ECF No. 8; (2) relief from post-filing litigation costs, ECF No. 24 14; and (3) a thirty-day to sixty-day extension of time to effect service as to defendant Mark 25 Hawk, along with miscellaneous relief in relation thereto, ECF No. 15. 26 For the reasons outlined below, the court denies the motions for electronic filing and 27 waiver of litigation costs (ECF Nos. 8, 14), grants a sixty-day extension to serve defendant Dr. 28 Mark Hawk, authorizes substitute service on Dr. Hawk to the extent that it needs to authorize 1 such service, denies leave to serve Dr. Hawk via service on attorney Bryce Gray, denies the 2 request to order the U.S. Marshals to effectuate service, and denies without prejudice the request 3 to shift costs of such service to Dr. Hawk (ECF No. 15).

4 I. ELECTRONIC FILING

5 An unrepresented party may only file documents electronically if allowed by court order 6 or by local rule. Fed. R. Civ. P. 5(d)(3)(B). This district’s Local Rules authorize a pro se party to 7 electronically file documents only with the assigned judge’s permission. L.R. 133(b)(2). Any 8 such request must be in the form of a stipulation or, when not possible, a written motion 9 explaining the reason for such exception. L.R. 133(b)(3). 10 Despite plaintiff having served four of the five defendants in this action (ECF Nos. 13, 11 16), her motion does not include defendant signatures, explain the lack of a stipulation, or 12 otherwise demonstrate that defendants agree to electronic filing. See ECF No. 8. As to why the 13 court should permit electronic filing, plaintiff asserts that it will enable “timely and efficient 14 submission” with a lower “risk of delays or errors” than manual filing, without prejudicing any 15 party. Id. at 1. These arguments apply to any plaintiff, yet she does not explain why the risk of 16 manual filing is higher for her than in other cases. 17 Leave to electronically file documents will be denied, but plaintiff will be permitted to 18 receive electronic service. This means that plaintiff will receive immediate email

notifications 19 when documents are filed in the case, and may access them online. Plaintiff must continue to file 20 paper documents with the court by conventional means.

21 II. COST WAIVER

22 Plaintiff argues that although she has now paid the initial filing fee, she remains indigent 23 under the definition of 28 U.S.C. § 1915. ECF No. 14 at 2. She cannot pay any subpoena service 24 fees or witness deposition fees; costs of obtaining transcripts, medical records, and electronic 25 logs; or other costs associated with litigation. *Id.* at 5. Without citing authority, plaintiff asserts 26 that courts have discretion to grant partial IFP status for post-filing litigation costs, and have done 27 so in the past. *Id.* at 2, 4-6. 28 The Supreme Court has held that “the expenditure of public funds [on behalf of an 1 indigent litigant] is proper only when authorized by Congress” rather than whenever Congress has 2 not expressly prohibited it. *United States v. MacCollom*, 426 U.S. 317, 321 (1976). The Ninth 3 Circuit has therefore concluded that even after a court has permitted a plaintiff to proceed IFP and 4 waived the filing fee, 28 U.S.C. § 1915 does not authorize waiver of other fees and costs. *Tedder 5 v. Odel*, 890 F.2d 210, 211-12 (9th Cir. 1989). Specifically, the granting of IFP status does not 6 exempt a litigant from paying the costs of copying and filing documents or service of documents 7 other than the complaint. *Beckely v. Raith*, No. C 13-02707 WHA, 2013 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 8 147621, 2013 WL 5568237 (N.D. Cal. October 9, 2013) (citing *Porter v. Dept. of Treasury*, 564 9 F.3d 176, 180 n.3 (3rd Cir. 2009)). 10 For these reasons, the motion is denied.

11 III. EXTENSION OF SERVICE

12 A. Background 13 Four of the five defendants returned executed waivers of service through defense counsel 14 on December 4, 2025. ECF No. 15 at 5, 27. This motion concerns only the fifth, Dr. Hawk. 15 When Dr. Hawk was a witness in a related state action, multiple attempts to personally 16 serve him in 2024 and 2025 were unsuccessful because “[t]his location will not accept personal 17 service, or produce an employee for service”. *Id.* at 5, 35-37, 39-41. Process servers were instead 18 instructed to email subpoenas to Kaiser Permanente’s Medical Legal Department. *Id.* at 38, 42. 19 In February 2025, when defendant Permanente Medical Group returned plaintiff’s check for Dr. 20 Hawk’s trial appearance witness fee, it advised her to contact “the attorney for Kaiser Mr. 21 Harper” to discuss Dr. Hawk’s appearance. *Id.* at 33. 22 When attorney Bryce Gray confirmed on September 29, 2025 that he represented all five 23 defendants in this action, he asked plaintiff to send “a Notice of Lawsuit and Request to Waive 24 Service of Summons” for each individual defendant. *Id.* at 18, 20. Gray explained that he did not 25 yet have the authority to accept service on their behalf, but expected that he would in due time. 26 *Id.* The next day, he asked plaintiff to either mail the requested documents or have the process 27 server give 48 hours’ notice of who would be serving these documents and at what time. *Id.* at 28 21. On October 2, 2025, plaintiff informed Gray that she intended to give defendants sixty days 1 to response to the complaint, calculated from the date the process server delivered the complaint, 2 summons, and requested forms. *Id.* at 22. 3 On December 4, 2025, Gray returned executed waivers

of service for four of the 4 defendants. *Id.* at 27. He asserted, however, that Dr. Hawk had still not authorized Gray to waive 5 personal service on his behalf. *Id.* at 27, 29. 6 B. Analysis 7 Courts must typically dismiss an action without prejudice as against any defendant who is 8 not served within 90 days of a plaintiff filing the complaint. Fed. R. Civ. P. 4(m). If the plaintiff 9 shows good cause for the failure, however, a court shall instead provide an appropriate extension 10 of the service deadline. *Id.* Because defendants subject to service within the United States also 11 must avoid any unnecessary expense of serving summons, a plaintiff may also provide such 12 defendants notice of the action and request waiver of service. Fed. R. Civ. P. 4(d)(1). Such 13 waiver must give the defendant reasonable time to return such waiver, at least 30 days after the 14 plaintiff sends such request. Fed. R. Civ. P. 4(d)(1)(F). If the defendant refuses to waive service 15 without good cause, the court must order the defendant to reimburse plaintiff the costs of making 16 such service, as well as the costs plaintiff incurs in filing a motion to invoke this remedy. Fed. R. 17 Civ. P. 4(d)(2). 18 Plaintiff first requests an additional thirty to sixty days to serve Dr. Hawk with this action. 19 ECF No. 15 at 2. Because summons were issued on September 26, 2025, the day that plaintiff 20 paid the filing fee, the current deadline for service is December 26, 2025. 21 ECF No. 4. For over 22 two months, the majority of the 90-day service period, plaintiff relied on Gray's assertion that he 23 would likely obtain authorization to waive service as to all five defendants. ECF No. 15 at 18, 20. That Gray eventually obtained this authorization as to the other four defendants demonstrates 24 that plaintiff was reasonable in relying on Gray's assertion. See *id.* at 27. Plaintiff should not be 25 penalized for such reliance, and the sixty-day extension of the service deadline is granted. 26 27 1 Because the 90-day period under Fed. R. Civ. P. 4(m) ends on December 25, 2025 (i.e. Christmas), the deadline is extended to the next day that is not a Saturday, Sunday, or legal 28 holiday. See Fed. R. Civ. P. 6(a)(1)(C). 1 Plaintiff then requests that the court authorize alternate service, either via service on 2 counsel or substitute service on Dr. Hawk's place of employment. *Id.* at 7. An individual may 3 only be served by delivering a copy of the summons and complaint to another if that person is "an 4 agent authorized by appointment or by law" to receive such service of process. Fed. R. Civ. P. 5 4(e)(2)(C). Whether Gray is authorized to act as such an agent is unclear, particularly as Dr. 6 Hawk never authorized Gray to waive service on his behalf. ECF No. 15 at 27, 29. Plaintiff 7 asserts that the Permanente Medical Group previously identified Gray as the point of contact for 8 discussing matters related to Dr. Hawk. ECF No. 15 at 6. The cited letter instead refers to a "Mr. 9 Harper", and plaintiff does not identify any tangible link between the two attorneys. *Id.* at 33. 10 The request to serve Dr. Hawk through Gray is denied. 11 Under California law, however, if a plaintiff cannot personally serve a defendant, the 12 process server may instead: 13 "leav[e] a copy of the summons and complaint at the person's dwelling house, usual place of abode, usual place of business, or 14 usual mailing address other than a United States Postal Service post office box, in the presence of a competent member of the household 15 or a person apparently in charge of his or her office, place of business, or usual mailing address other than a United States Postal 16 Service post office box, at

least 18 years of age, who shall be informed of the contents thereof, and by thereafter mailing a copy of 17 the summons and of the complaint by first-class mail, postage prepaid to the person to be served at the place where a copy of the 18 summons and complaint were left.” 19 Cal. Code Civ. P. § 415.20(b). This substitute service is effective ten days after the mailing of 20 said summons and complaint. Id. A federal plaintiff, in turn, may serve a defendant with the 21 summons by any means that comply with state law in the state where the district court is located. 22 Fed. R. Civ. P. (e)(1). Critically, this means plaintiff does not need the court’s leave to serve 23 someone through substitute service as permitted by California law. See *Khokhar v. J C K* 24 American Transport, Case No. EDCV 24-01529-MWF, 2025 WL 2427976 at *3, 2025 U.S. Dist. 25 LEXIS 195026 at *3 (C.D. Cal. Jul. 29, 2025). To the extent that the court must grant leave, the 26 request to serve Dr. Hawk via substitute service on his place of employment is granted. 27 Plaintiff also requests that the court order the U.S Marshals to serve Dr. Hawk, while 28 acknowledging that she is initially responsible for all related costs. ECF No. 15 at 8. It is 1 generally a plaintiff’s responsibility to serve each defendant with a copy of the summons and 2 complaint. Fed. R. Civ. P. 4(c)(1). The court “may order that service be made by a United States 3 marshal or deputy marshal” upon plaintiff’s request. Fed. R. Civ. P. 4(c)(3). A court is not 4 required to do so, however, unless a plaintiff is proceeding IFP or as a seaman. Id.; 28 U.S.C. §§ 5 1915, 1916. Plaintiff has not demonstrated a need for service by the U.S. Marshals Service. 6 Because substitute service should be adequate, this request is denied 7 Finally, plaintiff argues that because Dr. Hawk failed to sign a waiver of service, the court 8 should shift costs of such service to Dr. Hawk under Fed. R. Civ. P. 4(d)(2). ECF No. 15 at 3, 8. 9 The Federal Rules only authorize shifting such costs, as well as expenses plaintiff incurred via a 10 motion for such cost-shifting, if defendant lacked good cause for failing to sign and return the 11 waiver. Fed. R. Civ. P. 4(d)(2). Although plaintiff acknowledges this, she argues that his failure 12 to waive service when four similarly situated defendants did so demonstrates that Dr. Hawk 13 lacked good cause. ECF No. 15 at 3, 8. Circumstances unique to Dr. Hawk may have been 14 responsible, and he must receive a fair opportunity to articulate them. The motion to shift costs of 15 service to Dr. Hawk is denied, without prejudice to filing such a motion after Dr. Hawk has 16 appeared in this action.

17 IV. PRO SE PLAINTIFF SUMMARY

18 Your request to participate in the court’s electronic filing system is denied as to the filing 19 of documents but granted as to service. You must continue to file paper copies of all documents 20 in this action via delivery to the Clerk, per Local Rule 133(d), but you will receive email 21 notifications of activity in your case and be able to access documents online. 22 The court may not waive subpoena service or deposition fees, transcript fees, or any other 23 costs of litigation that you have not paid thus far. You are responsible for all such fees and costs. 24 The deadline for serving Dr. Hawk with the summons and complaint and summons will be 25 extended from December 26, 2025 to February 24, 2026. The U.S. Marshals will not be directed 26 to to serve Dr. Hawk on your behalf, but you may serve Dr. Hawk by complying with the 27 requirements for

substitute service under Cal. Code Civ. P. § 415.20(b). You may not serve Dr. Hawk by serving Bryce Gray, but you may need to consult with Gray as to how to leave a copy of the summons and complaint at Dr. Hawk's place of employment. If, for example, he again advises you to provide 48 hours' notice of your process server's delivery time, you are advised to comply. You are responsible for paying for service of process. After Dr. Hawk has been served and appears in this action, you may resubmit your motion to compel him to reimburse you such costs, including the costs of filing the motion. The court will not rule on such a motion until Dr. Hawk has had an opportunity to oppose the motion by presenting good cause as to why he did not waive service.

V. CONCLUSION

Accordingly, IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that: 1. Plaintiff's request to utilize the court's CM/ECF system (ECF No. 8) is GRANTED IN PART AND DENIED IN PART as follows: a. DENIED with respect to the filing of documents. Plaintiff will continue to file paper documents with the Court through conventional means; b. GRANTED with respect to electronic service of documents. The Clerk is DIRECTED to configure plaintiff's account so that plaintiff will receive immediate email notifications when documents are filed in the case. Plaintiff consents to receive service of documents electronically and waives the right to receive service by first class mail pursuant to FRCP 5(b)(2)(D); 2. Plaintiff's motion for relief from post-filing litigation costs (ECF No. 14) is DENIED; and 3. Plaintiff's motion for an order regarding service on defendant Dr. Mark Hawk (ECF No. 22 15) is: a. GRANTED as to the request to extend the deadline to February 24, 2026; b. DENIED as to the request to authorize service on Dr. Hawk via service on Bryce Gray as counsel; c. GRANTED as to the request to authorize service via substitute service on Dr. Hawk's place of employment; d. DENIED as to the request to order the U.S. Marshals to serve Dr. Hawk with the] complaint and summons; and e. DENIED WITHOUT PREJUDICE as to the request to shift all costs of such service of process to Dr. Hawk. 4 || DATED: December 23, 2025 ~

ALLISON CLAIRE

UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE

7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28