

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE DISTRICT OF MONTANA,
GREAT FALLS DIVISION

April Ellis v. Frank Torres, et al.

Ellis v. Torres · No. CV 26-09-GF-DWM · Decided April 20, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the District of Montana grants Defendants’ motion to stay April Ellis’s 42 U.S.C. § 1983 action under *Younger v. Harris* pending resolution of her related state criminal proceedings. The court concludes that the state criminal case is ongoing, implicates important state interests, and provides an opportunity to raise federal constitutional claims. The court also directs Defendants to move to lift the stay within 30 days of the Montana Supreme Court’s decision and gives Ellis 21 days thereafter to file a compliant amended pleading.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the District of Montana, Great Falls Division
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Donald W. Molloy
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the District of Montana, Great Falls Division
DECIDED	April 20, 2026
DOCKET	CV 26-09-GF-DWM
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Defendants moved to stay Ellis's 42 U.S.C. § 1983 action under <i>Younger v. Harris</i> while related state criminal proceedings remained pending.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court applied the <i>Younger</i> abstention factors to determine whether a stay was appropriate; no deferential appellate standard of review was identified.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	nonprecedential district court order
PARTIES	April Ellis v. Frank Torres, et al.

TOPICS

- civil procedure
- section 1983
- first amendment
- fourth amendment
- pleadings

PRACTICE AREAS

civil procedure

constitutional law

civil rights

federal courts

criminal procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the federal § 1983 action should be stayed under Younger abstention while Ellis's related state criminal proceedings remained pending.
2. Whether Ellis's amended complaint failed to comply with Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8(a)(1)'s requirement of a short and plain statement.

HOLDINGS

1. A stay was appropriate under Younger because the related state criminal proceeding was ongoing, judicial in nature, implicated important state interests, and did not bar Ellis from litigating her federal constitutional claims.
2. The 235-page, single-spaced amended complaint containing twenty-nine counts did not comply with Rule 8(a)(1)'s requirement of a short and plain statement, and Ellis was required to file a compliant amended pleading after the stay was lifted.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“*“Younger abstention is an exception to that rule, reflecting a national policy forbidding federal courts to stay or enjoin pending state court proceedings except under special circumstances.”*” (at 1)

“*“Younger requires only the absence of ‘procedural bars’ to raising a federal claim in the state proceedings.”*” (at 2)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Ellis alleged that several individuals and entities violated her civil rights during a 2023 traffic stop involving Great Falls Police Officer Frank Torres. The stop resulted in state criminal proceedings that remained pending before the Montana Supreme Court in Cause No. DA 25-0460. Her federal amended complaint asserted, among other claims, First Amendment retaliation and Fourth Amendment claims for unlawful seizure, false arrest, and excessive force.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Ellis filed a federal civil-rights action arising from a 2023 traffic stop. The state criminal matter arising from the stop remained pending before the Montana Supreme Court. The district court granted defendants' motion to stay under Younger abstention and directed defendants to move to lift the stay within thirty days after the state court's decision.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- Younger v. Harris, 401 U.S. 37 (1971)
- Heck v. Humphrey, 512 U.S. 477 (1994)
- Stockton v. Brown, 152 F.4th 1124, 1135 (9th Cir. 2025)
- Samuels v. Mackell, 401 U.S. 66 (1971)
- Gilbertson v. Albright, 381 F.3d 965, 983-84 (9th Cir. 2004)
- Sprint Comms., Inc. v. Jacobs, 571 U.S. 69, 78 (2013)
- Kelly v. Robinson, 479 U.S. 36, 49 (1986)
- Comms. Telesys. Int'l v. Cal. Pub. Utilities Comm'n, 196 F.3d 1011, 1020 (9th Cir. 1999)
- Middlesex Cnty. Ethics Comm. v. Garden St. Bar Ass'n, 457 U.S. 423, 432 (1982)