

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Crago v. Sacramento County Towing Enforcement Supervisor

No. 2:25-cv-00086-DC-CKD PS (E.D. Cal. Mar. 28, 2025) · No. 2:25-cv-00086-DC-CKD PS · Decided March 28, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California grants Mary Crago’s application to proceed in forma pauperis but dismisses her complaint for failure to state a claim. The court concludes that the allegations concerning vehicle impoundment, towing charges, and towing-company procedures do not plausibly establish violations of the Fourth Amendment, Eighth Amendment Excessive Fines Clause, or due process. Plaintiff is granted thirty days to file an amended complaint.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Carolyn K. Delaney
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
DECIDED	March 28, 2025
DOCKET	2:25-cv-00086-DC-CKD PS
DISPOSITION	dismissed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Pro se plaintiff sought leave to proceed in forma pauperis in a civil-rights action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. After screening the complaint under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2), the court dismissed it for failure to state a claim and granted leave to amend.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court screened the in forma pauperis complaint under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B), accepting factual allegations as true unless clearly baseless or fanciful, construing them in the light most favorable to plaintiff, and assessing whether the complaint stated a plausible claim for relief.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	nonprecedential
PARTIES	Mary Crago v. Sacramento County Towing Enforcement Supervisor, et al.

TOPICS

civil procedure

section 1983

due process

excessive fines

constitutional law

PRACTICE AREAS

civil rights

constitutional law

civil procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the complaint plausibly alleged that the impoundment of Crago's vehicles was an unreasonable seizure under the Fourth Amendment.
2. Whether charges imposed by private towing companies constituted an excessive fine under the Eighth Amendment.
3. Whether the alleged failure to allow Crago to present evidence at a tow hearing stated a procedural due-process claim.
4. Whether the complaint stated a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 against persons acting under color of state law.
5. Whether Crago should be granted leave to amend after dismissal of the complaint.

HOLDINGS

1. The complaint failed to state a Fourth Amendment claim because it did not allege facts plausibly showing that the impoundment was unreasonable or inconsistent with the community-caretaking function.
2. The complaint failed to state an excessive-fines claim because a private towing-company charge is not a constitutionally actionable fine.
3. The complaint failed to state a due-process claim because Crago challenged procedures employed by private towing companies and did not allege a deprivation attributable to a state actor.
4. The complaint failed to state a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 because it did not plausibly allege a violation of a constitutional or federal right by a person acting under color of state law.
5. Leave to amend was appropriate because a pro se litigant is generally entitled to notice of pleading deficiencies and an opportunity to amend unless the deficiencies cannot be cured.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"A seizure of property occurs when there is some meaningful interference with an individual's possessory interests in that property." (at 3)

"The excessive-fines clause of the Eighth Amendment 'limits the government's power to extract payments, whether in cash or kind, as punishment.'" (at 4)

"To prevail on this claim, plaintiff must prove that she was denied a specified liberty or property interest protected under the due-process clause and that she was deprived of that interest without the constitutionally required procedures." (at 4)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Sacramento County Sheriff's Department deputies were called to a Napa Auto Parts store following a trespassing complaint involving Crago. Her truck and recreational vehicle were towed after deputies allegedly told her that the vehicles were being towed because she was unlicensed and uninsured, and the vehicles were taken to different tow yards, resulting in charges she characterized as excessive fines. Crago also alleged that she was not allowed to present evidence at a tow hearing and named both governmental and private towing-related defendants.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Crago filed a complaint alleging federal civil-rights violations arising from the towing and impoundment of her truck and recreational vehicle. The court granted her application to proceed in forma pauperis, screened the complaint, determined that the allegations did not plausibly establish Fourth Amendment, excessive-fines, or due-process violations, dismissed the complaint, and allowed thirty days to file an amended complaint.

DISPOSITION

dismissed

CASES CITED

- Lopez v. Smith, 203 F.3d 1122, 1126-27 (9th Cir. 2000)
- Neitzke v. Williams, 490 U.S. 319, 325, 327 (1989)
- Von Saher v. Norton Simon Museum of Art at Pasadena, 592 F.3d 954, 960 (9th Cir. 2010)
- Haines v. Kerner, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972)
- Western Mining Council v. Watt, 643 F.2d 618, 624 (9th Cir. 1981)
- Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544, 555-57, 570 (2007)
- Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009)
- Noll v. Carlson, 809 F.2d 1446, 1448 (9th Cir. 1987)
- West v. Atkins, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988)
- Soldal v. Cook County, 506 U.S. 56, 61 (1992)
- South Dakota v. Opperman, 428 U.S. 364, 368-69 (1976)
- United States v. Caseres, 533 F.3d 1064, 1075 (9th Cir. 2008)
- Hallstrom v. Garden City, 991 F.2d 1473, 1477-78 n.4 (9th Cir. 1993)
- Colorado v. Bertine, 479 U.S. 367, 373 (1987)
- Illinois v. Lafayette, 462 U.S. 640, 647 (1983)
- United States v. Bajakajian, 524 U.S. 321, 328 (1998)
- Austin v. United States, 509 U.S. 602, 609-10 (1993)
- Andreaccio v. Weaver, 674 F. Supp. 3d 1011, 1023 (D. Nev. 2023)
- Castillo v. McFadden, 399 F.3d 993, 1002 n.5 (9th Cir. 2005)

- *Zinerman v. Burch*, 494 U.S. 113, 125 (1990)
- *Daniels v. Williams*, 474 U.S. 327, 331 (1986)
- *Swarthout v. Cooke*, 562 U.S. 216, 219 (2011)
- *Lucas v. Department of Corrections*, 66 F.3d 245, 248 (9th Cir. 1995)
- *Loux v. Rhay*, 375 F.2d 55, 57 (9th Cir. 1967)

OPINION

(PS) *Crago v. Sacramento County Towing Enforcement Supervisor*

PER CURIAM.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

9 FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

10

11 MARY CRAGO, No. 2:25-cv-00086-DC-CKD PS

12 Plaintiff, 13 v. ORDER 14

SACRAMENTO COUNTY TOWING

15 ENFORCEMENT SUPERVISOR, et. al., 16 Defendants. 17 18 Plaintiff, proceeding without
counsel in this action, requests leave to proceed in forma 19 pauperis (“IFP”).¹ (ECF No. 2.) See
28 U.S.C. § 1915 (authorizing the commencement of an 20 action “without prepayment of fees or
security” by a person who is unable to pay such fees). 21 Plaintiff’s application makes the showing
required by 28 U.S.C. § 1915 so her motion to proceed 22 in forma pauperis will be granted. 23 I.
Screening Requirement 24 Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e), the court must screen every in forma
pauperis 25 proceeding, and must order dismissal of the case if it is “frivolous or malicious,” “fails
to state a 26 claim on which relief may be granted,” or “seeks monetary relief against a defendant
who is 27 1 Actions in which a party proceeds without counsel are referred to a magistrate judge
pursuant to 28 E.D. Cal. L.R. 302(c)(21). See 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1) and Fed. R. Civ. P. 72. 1
immune from such relief.” 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B); *Lopez v. Smith*, 203 F.3d 1122, 1126-27 2
(2000). A claim is legally frivolous when it lacks an arguable basis either in law or in fact. 3
Neitzke v. Williams, 490 U.S. 319, 325 (1989). In reviewing a complaint under this standard, the 4
court accepts as true the factual allegations contained in the complaint, unless they are clearly 5
baseless or fanciful, and construes those allegations in the light most favorable to the plaintiff. 6
See *Neitzke*, 490 U.S. at 327; *Von Saher v. Norton Simon Museum of Art at Pasadena*, 592 F.3d 7
954, 960 (9th Cir. 2010), cert. denied, 564 U.S. 1037 (2011). 8 Pro se pleadings are held to a less
stringent standard than those drafted by lawyers. *Haines 9 v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972).
However, the court need not accept as true conclusory 10 allegations, unreasonable inferences, or
unwarranted deductions of fact. *Western Mining Council 11 v. Watt*, 643 F.2d 618, 624 (9th Cir.
1981). A formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of 12 action does not suffice to state a
claim. *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555-57 13 (2007); *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556

U.S. 662, 678 (2009). 14 To state a claim on which relief may be granted, the plaintiff must allege enough facts “to 15 state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.” *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 570. “A claim has facial 16 plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable 17 inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678. A pro se 18 litigant is entitled to notice of the deficiencies in the complaint and an opportunity to amend 19 unless the complaint’s deficiencies could not be cured by amendment. See *Noll v. Carlson*, 809 20 F.2d 1446, 1448 (9th Cir. 1987), superseded on other grounds by statute as stated in *Lopez v. 21 Smith*, 203 F.3d 1122 (9th Cir. 2000) (en banc). 22 II. Plaintiff’s Allegations 23 Plaintiff’s truck and RV were towed after Sacramento County Sheriff’s Department 24 deputies were called to the Napa Auto Parts store for a trespassing complaint. (ECF No. 1 at 13.) 25 This happened despite the store clerk confirming that plaintiff had been in the store and made a 26 purchase. (Id. at 14.) Unnamed deputies informed plaintiff that the vehicles were being towed 27 because plaintiff was not licensed and had no insurance. (Id.) The vehicles were towed to 28 different tow yards which caused “excessive fines.” (Id. at 20.) 1 Plaintiff alleges a violation of her federal civil rights. (ECF No.1 at 4.) The defendants 2 named in the complaint are Sacramento County Towing Enforcement Supervisor, Sacramento 3 County Towing Enforcement Clerk, Sal Mendoza, College Oak Towing Driver and Clerk, 4 Internal Affairs, Lien Machine Inc., Curtis Waters Sacramento County Sheriff, Sacramento 5 County Sheriff Officer #2, Napa Auto Parts Store Clerk, and Napa Auto Parts Corporate Office.

6 Id. at 9-12.

7 III. The complaint fails to state a claim. 8 To state a claim under the Civil Rights Act, 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege two 9 essential elements: (1) that a right secured by the Constitution or laws of the United States was 10 violated, and (2) that the alleged violation was committed by a person acting under the color of 11 state law. *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988). The court considers below whether plaintiff has 12 alleged an unreasonable seizure under the Fourth Amendment, a violation of Excessive Fines 13 Clause of the Eighth Amendment, or a Due Process violation to meet the essential elements for a 14 claim under the Civil Rights Act. 15 A. Fourth Amendment 16 The Fourth Amendment protects the “right of people to be secure in their persons, houses, 17 papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures.” U.S. CONST. amend. IV. A 18 seizure of property occurs when there is some meaningful interference with an individual’s 19 possessory interests in that property. *Soldal v. Cook County, Ill.*, 506 U.S. 56, 61 (1992). The 20 impoundment of plaintiff’s vehicle was a seizure within the meaning of the Fourth Amendment. 21 Police officers are permitted to impound vehicles pursuant to the community caretaker 22 exception to the Fourth Amendment. *South Dakota v. Opperman*, 428 U.S. 364, 368 (1976). 23 Whether a vehicle may be impounded under the community caretaking doctrine “depends on the 24 location of the vehicle and the police officer’s duty to prevent it from creating a hazard to other 25 drivers or from being a target for vandalism or theft.” *United States v. Caseres*, 533 F.3d 1064, 26 1075 (9th Cir. 2008); *Hallstrom v. Garden City*, 991 F.2d 1473, 1477

n.4 (9th Cir. 1993) 27 (upholding the towing of a car from a public parking lot following the driver's arrest pursuant to 28 the community caretaking exception of the warrant requirement). 1 Here, plaintiff alleges the impoundment occurred after she was falsely accused of 2 trespassing, based on her suspended registration and driver's license. (ECF No. 1 at 14.) Plaintiff 3 avers that because she was not trespassing there was no basis for impoundment. (Id. at 18.) "The 4 reasonableness of any particular governmental activity does not necessarily or invariably turn on 5 the existence of alternative 'less intrusive' means." *Colorado v. Bertine*, 479 U.S. 367, 373 (1987) 6 (quoting *Illinois v. Lafayette*, 462 U.S. 640, 647 (1983)). This means that police have no Fourth 7 Amendment obligation to offer a driver an opportunity to avoid impoundment. *Bertine*, 479 U.S. 8 at 373 (rejecting argument that the Fourth Amendment required police to give opportunity to 9 make other arrangements). 10 The allegations in the complaint do not state a claim for a violation of plaintiff's rights 11 under the Fourth Amendment. The complaint does not describe any circumstances suggesting 12 impoundment was inconsistent with the community caretaking function in this instance. Plaintiff 13 has not pleaded any facts that plausibly suggest the seizure was unreasonable. Under *Opperman*, 14 "[t]he authority of police to seize and remove from the streets vehicles impeding traffic or 15 threatening public safety and convenience is beyond challenge." 428 U.S. at 369; see also 16 *Hallstrom*, 991 F.2d at 1478 n.4. 17 B. Excessive Fines 18 In addition to the impoundment of the vehicle, plaintiff challenges costs associated with 19 the towing of her vehicles. The excessive-fines clause of the Eighth Amendment "limits the 20 government's power to extract payments, whether in cash or kind, as punishment." *United States* 21 *v. Bajakajian*, 524 U.S. 321, 328, (1998) (quoting *Austin v. United States*, 509 U.S. 602, 609– 10 22 (1993)). However, a private towing-company charge is not a constitutionally actionable fine. 23 *Andreaccio v. Weaver*, 674 F.Supp.3d 1011, 1023 (D. Nev. 2023). 24 C. Due Process 25 Plaintiff also claims that she was deprived of constitutional due process when she was 26 "never allowed to present evidence" at "the tow hearing." (ECF No. 1 at 22.) The Fifth 27 Amendment "prohibits the federal government from depriving persons of due process, while the 28 Fourteenth Amendment explicitly prohibits deprivations without due process by the several 1 states." *Castillo v. McFadden*, 399 F.3d 993, 1002 n.5 (9th Cir. 2005). Due-process claims can be 2 sorted into two types: (1) those brought under the substantive component of the due-process 3 clause, which "bars certain arbitrary, wrongful government actions, 'regardless of the fairness of 4 the procedures used to implement them[,]'" and (2) those brought under the procedural 5 component of the due-process clause, which prohibits deprivations of life, liberty, or property 6 without fair procedure. *Zinermon v. Burch*, 494 U.S. 113, 125 (1990) (quoting *Daniels v. Williams*, 474 U.S. 327, 331 (1986)). Although not directly stated, plaintiff seems to suggest a 8 procedural due process claim. To prevail on this claim, plaintiff must prove that she was denied a 9 specified liberty or property interest protected under the due-process clause and that she was 10 deprived of that interest without the constitutionally required procedures. *Swarthout v. Cooke*, 11 562 U.S. 216, 219, (2011). 12 In this case, however, plaintiff is challenging the procedures of the towing companies.

As 13 the towing companies are private companies, plaintiff's claims regarding her due process rights 14 must fail. 15 IV. Conclusion and Order 16 The complaint fails to state a claim for a violation of plaintiff's federal civil rights and 17 must be dismissed. Plaintiff is granted leave to file an amended complaint within the time frame 18 set forth below. See *Lucas v. Dep't of Corr.*, 66 F.3d 245, 248 (9th Cir. 1995); Fed. R. Civ. P. 19 15(a) (Leave to amend should be "freely given when justice so requires."). 20 If plaintiff elects to file an amended complaint, it should be titled "First Amended 21 Complaint" and reference the appropriate case number. An amended complaint must be complete 22 in itself without reference to any prior pleading. See *Loux v. Rhay*, 375 F.2d 55, 57 (9th Cir. 23 1967); Local Rule 220. If plaintiff elects to file an amended complaint, the complaint should 24 allege in specific terms how each named defendant is involved in the alleged violations. 25 In accordance with the above, IT IS ORDERED: 26 1. Plaintiff's motion to proceed in forma pauperis (ECF No. 2) is GRANTED; 27 2. Plaintiff's complaint (ECF No. 1) is dismissed for failure to state a claim; 28 3. Plaintiff is granted thirty (30) days from the date of service of this order to file an 1 | amended complaint that complies with the requirements of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure 2 | and the Local Rules of Practice; the amended complaint must bear the docket number assigned 3 || this case and must be labeled "First Amended Complaint"; plaintiff is cautioned that failure to file 4 || an amended complaint or otherwise respond to this order will result in a recommendation that this 5 || action be dismissed. 6 | Dated: March 28, 2025 / hice ANKE) flo

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8 UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE

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