

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Kevin Duane Hickman v. California Department of Corrections, et al.

Hickman · No. 2:25-cv-2662-JDP (P) · Decided December 22, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California dismissed pro se prisoner Kevin Duane Hickman’s complaint with leave to amend. The court held that the complaint did not adequately allege deliberate indifference under the Eighth Amendment, that claims against CDCR were barred by Eleventh Amendment immunity, and that claims against San Joaquin County failed to establish municipal liability. The court also declined supplemental jurisdiction over the state-law gross-negligence claim and dismissed the international-law claims for lack of jurisdiction, while granting in forma pauperis status and allowing thirty days to amend or voluntarily dismiss.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Jeremy D. Peterson
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
DECIDED	December 22, 2025
DOCKET	2:25-cv-2662-JDP (P)
DISPOSITION	dismissed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	A state prisoner proceeding pro se brought claims under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, state-law gross negligence, and international treaties concerning alleged exposure to toxic drinking water. The court screened the complaint under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e), dismissed it for failure to state cognizable claims and lack of jurisdiction over the treaty-based claim, and granted leave to amend.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Mandatory screening under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e); the complaint had to contain a short and plain statement and sufficient factual matter to state a plausible claim for relief under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8(a)(2) and the pleading standards of Twombly and Iqbal. Pro se allegations were construed liberally, but the court could not supply essential elements missing from the pleading.

PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unknown; district-court order with no reporter citation and no stated precedential status.
PARTIES	Kevin Duane Hickman v. California Department of Corrections, San Joaquin County

TOPICS

[section 1983](#)
[pleadings](#)
[prisoners rights](#)
[cruel and unusual punishment](#)
[subject matter jurisdiction](#)

PRACTICE AREAS

[civil rights](#)
[prisoner litigation](#)
[federal jurisdiction](#)
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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the complaint stated an Eighth Amendment claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 based on alleged exposure to toxic drinking water.
2. Whether the claims against the California Department of Corrections were barred by Eleventh Amendment immunity.
3. Whether the complaint stated a municipal liability claim against San Joaquin County under Monell.
4. Whether the alleged conduct should be analyzed under the Eighth Amendment rather than substantive due process under the Fourteenth Amendment.
5. Whether the court had jurisdiction over the state-law gross-negligence claim and the treaty-based human-rights claim.

HOLDINGS

1. The complaint failed to state an Eighth Amendment claim because it did not allege facts showing that any defendant knew the water was toxic at the time of plaintiff's exposure and nevertheless disregarded an excessive risk to his health or safety.
2. The claims against the California Department of Corrections were barred by Eleventh Amendment immunity because CDCR is a state agency, California has not waived its immunity for § 1983 claims in federal court, and plaintiff did not sue individual state officials for prospective relief.
3. The claim against San Joaquin County failed because a municipal-liability claim under § 1983 requires an underlying constitutional violation, and plaintiff failed to allege one.
4. The alleged forced exposure to toxic chemicals was governed by the Eighth Amendment's prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment rather than substantive due process under the Fourteenth Amendment.
5. The court declined to exercise supplemental jurisdiction over the state-law gross-negligence claim after dismissing all claims over which it had original jurisdiction.

6. The court lacked jurisdiction over plaintiff's treaty-based claim because plaintiff was an American citizen, the Alien Tort Statute authorizes jurisdiction over civil actions by noncitizens, and no federal statute authorized the asserted international-law claim.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“A complaint must contain a short and plain statement that plaintiff is entitled to relief, Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2), and provide “enough facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face,”” (at 1)

“Crucially, nothing in the complaint alleges that any of the defendants knew that the water was toxic at the time of plaintiff’s exposure.” (at 2)

“However, plaintiff does not assert claims against any individual state officials in their official capacities. As such, the Ex Parte Young exception does not apply and plaintiff’s 1983 claim against CDCR is barred by Eleventh Amendment immunity.” (at 3)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Hickman alleged that he was forcibly exposed to toxic environmental conditions at the California Health Care Facility, including drinking water allegedly contaminated with chloroform, carbon tetrachloride, and other chemicals. He claimed that the exposure caused respiratory problems, emotional distress, and psychological trauma. He relied on environmental-regulator evidence from 1989 and 2017, the proximity of the Stockton City landfill, and water testing by CDCR staff, but did not allege that defendants knew the water was toxic during his alleged exposure from 2022 onward.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Plaintiff filed a complaint and an application to proceed in forma pauperis. The court granted in forma pauperis status, screened the complaint, found the federal constitutional claims deficient, declined supplemental jurisdiction over the state-law claim, and dismissed the complaint with leave to amend. Plaintiff was given thirty days to file an amended complaint or a notice of voluntary dismissal without prejudice.

DISPOSITION

dismissed

CASES CITED

- Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007)
- Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662, 678-79 (2009)
- Kobold v. Good Samaritan Regional Medical Center, 832 F.3d 1024, 1038 (9th Cir. 2016)
- Nagrampa v. MailCoups, Inc., 469 F.3d 1257, 1264 n.2 (9th Cir. 2006) (en banc)
- Haines v. Kerner, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972) (per curiam)
- Hayes v. Idaho Correctional Center, 849 F.3d 1204, 1208 (9th Cir. 2017)
- Bruns v. National Credit Union Administration, 122 F.3d 1251, 1257 (9th Cir. 1997)

- Ivey v. Board of Regents, 673 F.2d 266, 268 (9th Cir. 1982)
- Toguchi v. Chung, 391 F.3d 1051, 1057 (9th Cir. 2004)
- Will v. Michigan Department of State Police, 491 U.S. 58, 66 (1989)
- Dittman v. California, 191 F.3d 1020, 1025-26 (9th Cir. 1999)
- Will v. Michigan Department of State Police, 491 U.S. 58, 71 n.10 (1989)
- Monell v. Department of Social Services of the City of New York, 436 U.S. 658, 701 (1978)
- United States v. Lanier, 520 U.S. 259, 272 n.7 (1997)
- Arroyo v. Rosas, 19 F.4th 1202, 1210 (9th Cir. 2021)
- Princz v. Federal Republic of Germany, 26 F.3d 1166, 1169 n.1 (D.C. Cir. 1994)

OPINION

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT 9 FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
 CALIFORNIA 10 11 KEVIN DUANE HICKMAN, Case No. 2:25-cv-2662-JDP (P) 12 Plaintiff,
 13 v. ORDER 14 CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS, et al., 15 Defendants. 16
 17 18 Plaintiff, a state prisoner proceeding pro se, brings this action against California 19
 Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (“CDCR”) and San Joaquin County.

The 20 allegations in the complaint are deficient. I will dismiss the complaint with leave to amend
 and 21 give plaintiff an opportunity to remedy this deficiency. Plaintiff’s application to proceed in
 forma 22 pauperis, ECF No. 2, makes the required showing and is granted. 23 Screening and
 Pleading Requirements 24 A federal court must screen the complaint of any claimant seeking
 permission to proceed 25 in forma pauperis.

See 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e). The court must identify any cognizable claims and 26 dismiss any
 portion of the complaint that is frivolous or malicious, fails to state a claim upon 27 28 1 which
 relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such 2
 relief. Id. 3 A complaint must contain a short and plain statement that plaintiff is entitled to relief,
 4 Fed.

R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2), and provide “enough facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its 5
 face,” Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007). The plausibility standard does not 6
 require detailed allegations, but legal conclusions do not suffice. See Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 7
 662, 678 (2009). If the allegations “do not permit the court to infer more than the mere 8
 possibility of misconduct,” the complaint states no claim.

Id. at 679. The complaint need not 9 identify “a precise legal theory.” Kobold v. Good Samaritan
 Reg’l Med. Ctr., 832 F.3d 1024, 10 1038 (9th Cir. 2016). Instead, what plaintiff must state is a
 “claim”—a set of “allegations that 11 give rise to an enforceable right to relief.” Nagrampa v.
 MailCoups, Inc., 469 F.3d 1257, 1264 12 n.2 (9th Cir. 2006) (en banc) (citations omitted).

13 The court must construe a pro se litigant's complaint liberally. See *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972) (per curiam). The court may dismiss a pro se litigant's complaint "if it 15 appears beyond doubt that the plaintiff can prove no set of facts in support of his claim which 16 would entitle him to relief." *Hayes v. Idaho Corr. Ctr.*, 849 F.3d 1204, 1208 (9th Cir.

2017). 17 However, "a liberal interpretation of a civil rights complaint may not supply essential elements 18 of the claim that were not initially pled.'" *Bruns v. Nat'l Credit Union Admin.*, 122 F.3d 1251, 19 1257 (9th Cir. 1997) (quoting *Ivey v. Bd. of Regents*, 673 F.2d 266, 268 (9th Cir. 1982)). 20 Analysis 21 Plaintiff alleges that he has been forcibly exposed to toxic environmental conditions at 22 California Health Care Facility ("CHCF"), and that these conditions have had negative impacts 23 on his health.

ECF No. 1 at 7. Specifically, plaintiff alleges that defendants made him drink 24 contaminated water that includes chloroform and carbon tetrachloride among other toxic 25 chemicals. *Id.* Plaintiff alleges that these conditions have caused him to suffer environmentally 26 induced respiratory problems, emotional distress, and psychological trauma. *Id.* at 8. 27 Plaintiff fails to state a section 1983 claim against either defendant.

In support of his 28 Eighth Amendment claim, plaintiff points to documented evidence by environmental regulators 1 from 1989 and 2017, the proximity of the Stockton City landfill to CHCF, and water testing from 2 CDCR's staff to allege that defendants knew or should have known that the water they exposed 3 plaintiff to was toxic. ECF No. 1 at 12.

However, the complaint alleges that plaintiff was 4 exposed to the toxic water from 2022 to the present, several years after the evidence that plaintiff 5 cites was developed. Crucially, nothing in the complaint alleges that any of the defendants knew 6 that the water was toxic at the time of plaintiff's exposure. This, without more, is insufficient to 7 show deliberate indifference to an excessive risk to inmate health and safety under the Eighth 8 Amendment.

Toguchi v. Chung, 391 F.3d 1051, 1057 (9th Cir. 2004) ("A prison official acts 9 with deliberate indifference... only if the [prison official] knows of and disregards an excessive 10 risk to inmate health and safety.").1 11 Even if the court were to find that plaintiff sufficiently alleged an Eighth Amendment 12 claim, plaintiff's claim against CDCR is barred by Eleventh Amendment immunity.

The 13 Eleventh Amendment generally prohibits federal courts from hearing a section 1983 lawsuit in 14 which damages or injunctive relief is sought against a state or its agencies (such as CDCR), 15 unless the state has waived its immunity. *Will v. Michigan Dep't of State Police*, 491 U.S. 58, 66 16 (1989). "The State of California has not waived its Eleventh Amendment immunity with respect 17 to claims brought under § 1983 in federal court...." *Dittman v. California*, 191 F.3d 1020, 18 1025-26 (9th Cir.

1999). A narrow exception exists under the Ex Parte Young doctrine that 19 allows prospective injunctive relief against state officials sued in their official capacities. See 20 Will, 491 U.S. at 71 n.10 (1989). However, plaintiff does not assert claims against any individual 21 state officials in their official capacities.

As such, the Ex Parte Young exception does not apply 22 and plaintiff's 1983 claim against CDCR is barred by Eleventh Amendment immunity. 23 Turning to the claims against the county, San Joaquin County is not immune from section 24 1 Plaintiff's Fourteenth Amendment section 1983 claim fails because prison officials' 25 forced exposure of plaintiff to toxic chemicals in the water is behavior against which the Eighth Amendment prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment provides a source of constitutional 26 protection.

See United States v. Lanier, 520 U.S. 259, 272 n.7 (1997) ("...[I]f a constitutional 27 claim is covered by a specific constitutional provision, such as the Fourth or Eighth Amendment, the claim must be analyzed under the standard appropriate to that specific provision, not under the 28 rubric of substantive due process."). 1 1983 claims under the Eleventh Amendment.

See Monell v. Dep't of Soc. Servs. of City of New 2 York, 436 U.S. 658, 701 (1978) (holding that municipal bodies sued under section 1983 are not 3 entitled to absolute immunity). Yet, because alleging a Monell claim against a municipality 4 requires a constitutional violation, and plaintiff fails to allege such a violation, the 1983 claim 5 against San Joaquin County also fails.

6 Plaintiff's claim for gross negligence is a state law claim over which the court may only 7 exercise supplemental or diversity jurisdiction. Given that the federal claims are dismissed, the 8 court declines to exercise supplemental jurisdiction over the state law claim. See Arroyo v. 9 Rosas, 19 F.4th 1202, 1210 (9th Cir. 2021) (holding that a court may decline to exercise 10 supplemental jurisdiction over a claim when the court has dismissed all claims over which it had 11 original jurisdiction).

12 The remaining claim is asserted under several international treaties for a violation of 13 plaintiff's human rights. Plaintiff invokes the Alien Tort Statute to the extent that it provides a 14 jurisdictional basis for its claims under international law. ECF No. 1 at 17.

However, as plaintiff 15 concedes, the Alien Tort Statute authorizes federal courts to exercise jurisdiction over civil 16 actions by non-citizens. See 28 U.S.C. § 1350. The court does not have jurisdiction over this 17 claim as plaintiff is an American citizen and no federal statute authorizes his claim. See Princz v. 18 Fed. Republic of Germany, 26 F.3d 1166 n.1 (D.C.

Cir. 1994) ("While it is true that international 19 law is a part of our law, it is also our law that a federal court is not competent to hear a claim 20 arising under international law absent a statute granting such jurisdiction."). 21 Accordingly, it is ORDERED that: 22 1. Plaintiff's complaint, contained in ECF No. 1, is DISMISSED with leave to amend. 23 2.

Plaintiff's application to proceed in forma pauperis, ECF No. 2, is GRANTED. 24 3. Within thirty days from service of this order, plaintiff shall file either (1) an amended 25 complaint or (2) notice of voluntary dismissal of this action without prejudice. 26 4. Failure to timely file either an amended complaint or notice of voluntary dismissal may 27 result in the imposition of sanctions, including a recommendation that this action be dismissed 28 with prejudice pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 41(b).

1 5. The Clerk of Court shall send plaintiff a complaint form with this order. 2 3 IT IS SO ORDERED. Dated: _ December 22, 2025 Q_——_. 5 JEREMY D. PETERSON 6 UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28