

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

Andy LaShawn Fortner v. Lake County Jail, et al.

Fortner · No. 25-cv-02506-HSG · Decided May 6, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Northern District of California dismisses Andy LaShawn Fortner’s pro se 42 U.S.C. § 1983 complaint following screening under 28 U.S.C. § 1915A. The court identifies deficiencies including failure to allege a federal constitutional or statutory violation, improper joinder, conclusory allegations, and inadequate pleading of municipal liability. The dismissal is without prejudice, and Plaintiff is granted 28 days to file an amended complaint.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Northern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Haywood S. Gilliam, Jr.
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Northern District of California
DECIDED	May 6, 2025
DOCKET	25-cv-02506-HSG
DISPOSITION	dismissed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Pro se prisoner civil-rights action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 screened under 28 U.S.C. § 1915A; complaint dismissed with leave to amend.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Preliminary screening under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915A and 1915(e); the court must dismiss claims that are frivolous, malicious, fail to state a claim, or seek monetary relief from an immune defendant. Pro se pleadings are liberally construed, but must satisfy Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8(a)(2) and state a plausible claim.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished district court order
PARTIES	Andy LaShawn Fortner v. Lake County Jail, et al.

TOPICS

- section 1983
- prisoners rights
- civil procedure
- joinder
- subject matter jurisdiction

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the complaint stated a cognizable claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 by alleging violation of a federal constitutional or statutory right by a person acting under color of state law.
2. Whether the complaint improperly joined unrelated claims and defendants under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 20.
3. Whether the complaint's conclusory allegations of harassment, intercom nonresponse, mail interference, and denial of care sufficiently stated constitutional claims.
4. Whether Lake County Jail or its personnel could be held liable under § 1983 absent a proper municipal-liability theory and factual allegations connecting the alleged violations to a county policy, custom, or final policymaker.
5. Whether the complaint should be dismissed with leave to amend.

HOLDINGS

1. The complaint failed to state a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 because it did not adequately allege a violation of federal law or the federal Constitution.
2. The complaint violated Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 20 because it combined claims concerning separate occurrences and defendants without allegations showing that the claims arose from the same transaction or occurrence and shared a common question of law or fact.
3. The complaint failed to state a claim because its allegations were conclusory and did not explain how the alleged mimicking, intercom nonresponse, or other conduct violated Plaintiff's constitutional rights.
4. Lake County Jail or an agency of Lake County is not the proper defendant for a municipal-liability claim, and Plaintiff must allege facts showing that any constitutional violation resulted from an expressly adopted county policy, a longstanding practice or custom, or a final policymaker's decision.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“multiple claims against a single party are fine, but Claim A against Defendant 1 should not be joined with unrelated Claim B against Defendant 2.” (at 2)

“not every unpleasant interaction with jail officials gives rise to a constitutional violation.” (at 3)

“The County is a proper defendant in a § 1983 claim, an agency of the County is not” (at 3)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Plaintiff, a pretrial detainee at Lake County Jail, alleged retaliation after filing grievances, denial of medical and mental-health-related care, verbal ridicule and harassment by deputies and medical staff, interference with outgoing and legal mail, and failure by an aid technician to respond to his intercom requests. He named Lake County Jail, jail staff, an aid technician, and other officials as defendants. The complaint presented multiple

incidents involving different defendants without clearly alleging the federal constitutional or statutory rights violated or facts establishing the required elements of a § 1983 claim.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Plaintiff, a pretrial detainee proceeding in forma pauperis, filed a § 1983 complaint against Lake County Jail and individual jail and medical personnel. The district court conducted preliminary screening and dismissed the complaint for failure to identify a federal constitutional or statutory violation, improper joinder, conclusory allegations, and improper or insufficient municipal-liability allegations. The court granted 28 days to file an amended complaint and warned that failure to do so would result in dismissal without further notice.

DISPOSITION

dismissed

CASES CITED

- Jackson v. Arizona, 885 F.2d 639, 641 (9th Cir. 1989)
- United States v. Qazi, 975 F.3d 989, 993 (9th Cir. 2020)
- Erickson v. Pardus, 551 U.S. 89, 93 (2007)
- Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662, 677-78 (2009)
- West v. Atkins, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988)
- George v. Smith, 507 F.3d 605, 607 (7th Cir. 2007)
- Freeman v. Arpaio, 125 F.3d 732, 738 (9th Cir. 1997)
- Shakur v. Schriro, 514 F.3d 878, 884-85 (9th Cir. 2008)
- Rutledge v. Arizona Board of Regents, 660 F.2d 1345, 1353 (9th Cir. 1981)
- Kush v. Rutledge, 460 U.S. 719 (1983)
- Mortimer v. Baca, 594 F.3d 714, 721 (9th Cir. 2010)
- Vance v. County of Santa Clara, 928 F. Supp. 993, 996 (N.D. Cal. 1996)
- Stump v. Gates, 777 F. Supp. 808, 816 (D. Colo. 1991)
- Ellins v. City of Sierra Madre, 710 F.3d 1049, 1066 (9th Cir. 2013)
- Monell v. Department of Social Services, 436 U.S. 658 (1978)
- Kokkonen v. Guardian Life Insurance Co. of America, 511 U.S. 1
- Bailey v. Johnson, 846 F.2d 1019, 1021 (5th Cir. 1988)
- Cato v. United States, 70 F.3d 1103, 1105 n.2 (9th Cir. 1995)
- Van Meter v. Morgan, 518 F.2d 366, 368 (8th Cir. 1975)
- Lacey v. Maricopa County, 693 F.3d 896, 925 (9th Cir. 2012)

OPINION

Fortner

PER CURIAM.

4 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

5 NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

6 7 ANDY LASHAWN FORTNER, Case No. 25-cv-02506-HSG 8 Plaintiff, ORDER OF
DISMISSAL WITH

LEAVE TO AMEND

9 v. 10 LAKE COUNTY JAIL, et al., 11 Defendants. 12 13 Plaintiff, a pre-trial detainee¹ currently
housed at Lake County Jail, has filed a pro se 14 action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983. His
complaint (Dkt. No. 12) is now before the Court for 15 review pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915A.
Plaintiff has been granted leave to proceed in forma 16 pauperis in a separate order.

17 DISCUSSION

18 A. Standard of Review 19 A federal court must conduct a preliminary screening in any case in
which a prisoner seeks 20 redress from a governmental entity or officer or employee of a
governmental entity. See 28 U.S.C. 21 §1915A(a). Under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e), “the court shall
dismiss the case at any time if the court 22 determines that . . . the action or appeal . . . is frivolous
or malicious.” 28 U.S.C. § 23 1915(e)(2)(B)(i). A claim that is incomprehensible may be
dismissed as frivolous as it is without 24 an arguable basis in law. See *Jackson v. Arizona*, 885
F.2d 639, 641 (9th Cir. 1989). In its 25 review, the court must identify any cognizable claims and
dismiss any claims that are frivolous, 26 malicious, fail to state a claim upon which relief may be
granted or seek monetary relief from a 27 1 defendant who is immune from such relief. See 28
U.S.C. § 1915A(b)(1), (2). Pro se pleadings 2 must, however, be liberally construed. See *United*
States v. Qazi, 975 F.3d 989, 993 (9th Cir. 3 2020). 4 Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8(a)(2)
requires only “a short and plain statement of the 5 claim showing that the pleader is entitled to
relief.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2). “Specific facts are not 6 necessary; the statement need only ““give
the defendant fair notice of what the . . . claim is and the 7 grounds upon which it rests.” *Erickson*
v. Pardus, 551 U.S. 89, 93 (2007) (citations omitted). 8 While Rule 8 does not require detailed
factual allegations, it demands more than an unadorned, 9 the-defendant-unlawfully-harmed-me
accusation. *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 677–78 (2009). 10 A pleading that offers only labels
and conclusions, or a formulaic recitation of the elements of a 11 cause of action, or naked
assertions devoid of further factual enhancement does not suffice. *Id.* 12 To state a claim under 42
U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege two essential elements: 13 (1) that a right secured by the
Constitution or laws of the United States was violated, and (2) that 14 the alleged violation was
committed by a person acting under the color of state law. See *West v. 15 Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48
(1988). 16 B. Dismissal with Leave to Amend 17 The complaint names as defendants “Lake
County Jail, Lake County Jail Staff + Aid Tech, 18 Ms. Peggy Perry.” The complaint makes the
following allegations. Plaintiff was retaliated against 19 after he filed grievances regarding Aid
Tech Peggy Perry, Deputy Cline, and Deputy Hodges. 20 Plaintiff was denied his medical rights.
Deputies mimicked Plaintiff and made fun of him, which 21 made him feel inhuman. Medical staff

called Plaintiff the boy who cried wolf. When Plaintiff 22 sends out mail, it is returned to him. The jail is not paying for Plaintiff's mail to go out. Sgt. 23 Jacobs, Lt. Holland, and Capt. Wells told deputies not to send out Plaintiff's mail and not to sign 24 Plaintiff's legal work. Plaintiff's grievances are all denied. The Aid Tech refused to answer when 25 Plaintiff pressed his intercom button, stating that Plaintiff was argumentative. Aid tech Perry 26 deliberately denied Plaintiff and other inmate "mental health coping skills rights" and retaliated 27 against Plaintiff to try to murder him and deny him medical attention. Aid tech Perry lied to Sgt. 1 generally Dkt. No. 12. 2 The Court DISMISSES the complaint because it suffers from various deficiencies, some of 3 which the Court identifies below. 4 First, the complaint does not allege any violation of federal law or the federal Constitution, 5 as is needed to state a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 and for federal subject matter jurisdiction. 6 Second, the complaint violates the joinder rule set forth in Fed. R. Civ. P. 20. Fed. R. Civ. 7 P. 20(a)(2) provides that all persons "may be joined in one action as defendants if: (A) any right to 8 relief is asserted against them jointly, severally, or in the alternative with respect to or arising out 9 of the same transaction, occurrence, or series of transactions or occurrences; and (B) any question 10 of law or fact common to all defendants will arise in the action." Fed. R. Civ. P. 20(a)(2). The 11 upshot of these rules is that "multiple claims against a single party are fine, but Claim A against

12 Defendant 1 should not be joined with unrelated Claim B against Defendant 2." *George v. Smith*,

13 507 F.3d 605, 607 (7th Cir. 2007). In this action, Plaintiff may only seek relief for incidents that 14 (1) arise out of the same occurrence; and (2) have a common question of law or fact common to all 15 defendants. For example, Plaintiff's allegations regarding Aid Tech Perry failing to respond when 16 he pressed the intercom button is a separate event from the alleged mail tampering or mimicking. 17 Plaintiff needs to choose the claims he wants to pursue in this action that meet the joinder 18 requirements. Plaintiff should file separate actions for the claims that arise out of separate 19 occurrences. 20 Third, Plaintiff has only proffered conclusory allegations. It is unclear how the mimicking 21 or refusal to answer an intercom button harmed Plaintiff to the extent that Plaintiff's constitutional 22 rights were violated. Plaintiff is cautioned that not every unpleasant interaction with jail officials 23 gives rise to a constitutional violation. Allegations of verbal harassment and abuse fail to state a 24 claim cognizable under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. See *Freeman v. Arpaio*, 125 F.3d 732, 738 (9th Cir. 25 1997) overruled in part on other grounds by *Shakur v. Schriro*, 514 F.3d 878, 884-85 (9th Cir. 26 2008); *Rutledge v. Arizona Bd. of Regents*, 660 F.2d 1345, 1353 (9th Cir. 1981), *aff'd sub nom.* 27 *Kush v. Rutledge*, 460 U.S. 719 (1983). Differences of opinion in medical treatment also do not 1 Fourth, to the extent that Plaintiff seeks to sue Lake County Jail or Lake County Jail 2 Medical, Plaintiff is cautioned that there is no respondeat superior liability under § 1983, i.e., 3 liability solely because a defendant is a supervisor or otherwise responsible for the actions or 4 omissions of another. See *Mortimer v. Baca*, 594 F.3d 714, 721 (9th Cir. 2010). If Plaintiff is 5 seeking to hold the Lake County Jail liable for

constitutional violations, he is alleging a municipal liability claim against Lake County, and the proper defendant for Plaintiff's municipal liability claim would be Lake County itself. Cf. *Vance v. County of Santa Clara*, 928 F. Supp. 993, 996 (N.D. Cal. 1996) (dismissing Santa Clara County Department of Corrections from Section 1983 action and noting that "[t]he County is a proper defendant in a § 1983 claim, an agency of the County is not"); *Stump v. Gates*, 777 F.Supp. 808, 816 (D. Colo. 1991) (noting that, "although some courts have overlooked it, naming a municipal department as a defendant is not an appropriate means of pleading a § 1983 action against a municipality"). However, in order to state a cognizable municipal liability claim against Lake County, Plaintiff must allege facts from which it can be reasonably inferred that the constitutional violations were because of an expressly adopted official Lake County policy, a long-standing Lake County practice or custom, or the decision of a final Lake County policymaker. *Ellins v. City of Sierra Madre*, 710 F.3d 1049, 1066 (9th Cir. 2013) (citing *Monell v. Dep't of Soc. Svcs.*, 436 U.S. 658 (1978)).

In the interests of justice, the Court grants Plaintiff leave to file an amended complaint.

C. Addressing Plaintiff's Frequent Filings

Plaintiff has filed at least ten lawsuits in the Central District of California and this district since January 2025. In these lawsuits, after filing the initial complaint, Plaintiff also files letters that inform the Court of any wrongs that he allegedly suffers as he experiences them. To assist Plaintiff in effectively seeking relief for alleged mistreatment, the Court provides Plaintiff the following guidance.

First, in this Court, Plaintiff should only file actions over which the Court has jurisdiction. Federal courts are courts of limited jurisdiction, which means that the Court is limited in the issues it may consider and relief it may provide. *Kokkonen v. Guardian Life Ins. Co. of Am.*, 511 U.S. 1 (1993) (diversity jurisdiction, i.e. the defendants must be from a state other than California and the amount in controversy be over a certain amount, or (2) federal question jurisdiction, i.e., the legal claim involves a federal law, the federal Constitution, or a United States treaty. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1331, 1332. Plaintiff may seek relief in this Court only for actions or inactions that violate federal law or the federal Constitution. The mere fact that Plaintiff has been poorly treated does not, without more, state a violation of federal law or the federal Constitution.

Second, Plaintiff should refrain from filing duplicative or repetitious litigation. Plaintiff should not file multiple lawsuits regarding the same event or issue. Duplicative or repetitious litigation of virtually identical causes of action is subject to dismissal under 28 U.S.C. § 1915 as frivolous. *Bailey v. Johnson*, 846 F.2d 1019, 1021 (5th Cir. 1988). An in forma pauperis complaint that merely repeats pending or previously litigated claims may be considered abusive and dismissed under Section 1915. *Cato v. United States*, 70 F.3d 1103, 1105 n.2 (9th Cir. 1995); *Bailey*, 846 F.2d at 1021. An in forma pauperis complaint repeating the same factual allegations asserted in an earlier case, even if now filed against new defendants, therefore is subject to dismissal as duplicative. *Bailey*, 846 F.2d at 1021; *Van Meter v. Morgan*, 518 F.2d 366, 368 (8th Cir. 1975).

Third, Plaintiff is cautioned that filing more than three lawsuits that fail to state a claim can

result in being denied leave to proceed in forma pauperis in future lawsuits. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(g) 19 provides that a prisoner may not proceed in forma pauperis in a civil action “if the prisoner has, on 20 3 or more prior occasions, while incarcerated or detained in any facility, brought an action or 21 appeal in a court of the United States that was dismissed on the grounds that it is frivolous, 22 malicious, or fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, unless the prisoner is under 23 imminent danger of serious physical injury.” 28 U.S.C. § 1915(g). Without the ability to proceed 24 in forma pauperis, Plaintiff would need to pay the full \$405 filing fee before he could proceed 25 with a lawsuit. Before filing an action, Plaintiff should research the relevant law to determine 26 whether he has a legal cause of action. 27 Fourth, Plaintiff should not file letters with the Court that inform the Court of events as 1 the operative complaint. Currently there is no operative complaint. Plaintiff cannot add events to 2 || his complaint via letters. Plaintiff should therefore refrain from writing letters to the Court to 3 report on events as they happen as these letters have no legal effect, and the Court cannot take 4 || action on letters. Filing numerous letters clutters the docket and may delay the Court’s ability to 5 address meritorious requests or issues.

6 CONCLUSION

7 For the foregoing reasons, the Court DISMISSES the complaint with leave to amend. 8 || Within twenty-eight (28) days of the date of this order, Plaintiff shall file an amended complaint 9 || that addresses the identified deficiencies. The amended complaint must include the caption and 10 || civil case number used in this order, Case No. C 25-02506 HSG (PR) and the words “AMENDED 11 COMPLAINT” on the first page. If using the court form complaint, Plaintiff must answer all the 12 || questions on the form in order for the action to proceed. An amended complaint completely 13 replaces the previous complaints. See *Lacey v. Maricopa Cnty.*, 693 F.3d 896, 925 (9th Cir. 14 || 2012). Accordingly, Plaintiff must include in his amended complaint all the claims he wishes to 3 15 present and all of the defendants he wishes to sue, and may not incorporate material from the prior a 16 || complaint by reference. Failure to file an amended complaint in accordance with this order in the 3 17 time provided will result in dismissal of this action without further notice to Plaintiff. The Clerk 18 || shall include two copies of the court’s complaint form with a copy of this order to Plaintiff. 19 IT IS SO ORDERED. 20 || Dated: 5/6/2025

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HAYWOOD S. GILLIAM, JR. 22 United States District Judge 23 24 25 26 27 28