

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Christopher M. Morgan v. S. Fears, et al.

Morgan v. Fears · No. 2:23-cv-01018-DJC-DMC-P · Decided September 30, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California declined to adopt the magistrate judge’s recommendation to dismiss Christopher M. Morgan’s Eighth Amendment claims with prejudice on qualified-immunity grounds. The court held that the complaint plausibly alleged deliberate indifference to the risk of COVID-19 exposure and that the asserted right was clearly established, denied the defendants’ motion to dismiss, and referred the matter back for further pretrial proceedings.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Daniel J. Calabretta
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
DECIDED	September 30, 2025
DOCKET	2:23-cv-01018-DJC-DMC-P
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Order reviewing de novo a magistrate judge's findings and recommendations recommending dismissal of a prisoner's 42 U.S.C. § 1983 complaint with prejudice on qualified-immunity grounds.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	De novo review under 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1)(C) and Eastern District of California Local Rule 304(f); at the motion-to-dismiss stage, the court assesses whether the complaint plausibly alleges a constitutional violation and whether qualified immunity can be determined from the complaint itself.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unknown; district court order with no reporter citation or stated precedential designation.
PARTIES	Christopher M. Morgan v. S. Fears, et al.

TOPICS

prisoners rights

cruel and unusual punishment

qualified immunity

section 1983

motions to dismiss

PRACTICE AREAS

civil rights

prisoner litigation

constitutional law

federal civil procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Plaintiff plausibly alleged that defendants acted with deliberate indifference to a substantial risk of serious harm in violation of the Eighth Amendment.
2. Whether the alleged right to be free from exposure to a serious disease was clearly established when the alleged conduct occurred in December 2020, defeating qualified immunity at the motion-to-dismiss stage.
3. Whether defendants' motion to dismiss should be granted based on failure to state an Eighth Amendment claim or qualified immunity.

HOLDINGS

1. Plaintiff plausibly alleged that involuntary exposure to COVID-19 presented a sufficiently serious risk to satisfy the objective component of an Eighth Amendment conditions-of-confinement claim.
2. Plaintiff plausibly alleged that defendants knew of and disregarded a substantial risk of serious harm, satisfying the subjective component of an Eighth Amendment claim.
3. Qualified immunity did not justify dismissal because the complaint plausibly alleged a constitutional violation and the right to be free from exposure to a serious disease was clearly established by December 2020.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“dismissal is not appropriate unless we can determine, based on the complaint itself, that qualified immunity applies.” (at 2)

“prison officials must ensure that inmates receive adequate food, clothing, shelter, and medical care” (at 3)

“acted. . . despite [their] knowledge of a substantial risk of serious harm.” (at 6)

“at the time of the officer’s conduct, the law was sufficiently clear that every reasonable official would understand that what he is doing is unlawful.” (at 7)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Plaintiff alleged that he was ordered to move into medical tents designated for COVID-19-positive inmates and that Defendant Casillas threatened disciplinary action and threatened to place COVID-19-positive inmates in his housing unit if he refused. He further alleged that six inmates recovering from COVID-19 were transferred into his housing unit without rapid testing during a no-movement order, that Defendant Fears forged their medical status, and that the unit lacked mental-health beds that could have justified the transfer. Plaintiff subsequently tested positive for COVID-19, and an outbreak occurred in the housing unit.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Plaintiff, a prisoner proceeding pro se, filed an action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 alleging that prison officials exposed him to COVID-19 in violation of the Eighth Amendment. The magistrate judge recommended dismissal with prejudice on qualified-immunity grounds. After timely objections and a response from defendants, the district court conducted de novo review, declined to adopt the findings and recommendations, denied defendants' motion to dismiss, and referred the matter back to the magistrate judge for further pretrial proceedings.

DISPOSITION

other

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

The matter is referred back to the magistrate judge for all further pretrial proceedings.

CASES CITED

- Mullenix v. Luna, 577 U.S. 7, 11 (2015) (per curiam)
- Pearson v. Callahan, 555 U.S. 223, 232-36 (2009)
- Polanco v. Diaz, 76 F.4th 918, 925 (9th Cir. 2023)
- Hampton v. California, 83 F.4th 754, 759-60, 765-67, 770-71 (9th Cir. 2023)
- Farmer v. Brennan, 511 U.S. 825, 832, 842 (1994)
- Helling v. McKinney, 509 U.S. 25, 33 (1993)
- Hines v. Youseff, 914 F.4th 1218 (9th Cir. 2019)
- Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007)
- Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662 (2009)
- Stewart v. Aranas, 32 F.4th 1192, 1195 (9th Cir. 2022)
- District of Columbia v. Wesby, 583 U.S. 48, 63 (2018)

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