

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)

OPINION

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT 9 FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA 10 11 CHRISTOPHER M. MORGAN, No. 2:23-cv-01018-DJC-DMC-P 12
Plaintiff, 13 v. ORDER 14 S. FEARS, et al., 15 Defendants. 16 17 18 Plaintiff, a prisoner
proceeding pro se, brings this civil rights action pursuant to 19 42 U.S.C § 1983.

The matter was referred to a United States Magistrate Judge 20 pursuant to the Eastern District of
California’s Local Rules. 21 On March 3, 2025, the Magistrate Judge filed Findings and
Recommendations 22 herein which were served on the Parties, and which contained notice that the
Parties 23 may file objections within the time specified therein. Plaintiff filed timely objections to
24 the Findings and Recommendations (ECF No. 35.).1 25 26 27 1 Defendants filed a Response
(ECF No. 36) to Plaintiff’s Objections, which Plaintiff argues are untimely 28 (ECF No. 37.)

The Court has exercised its discretion to consider Defendants' Response. 1 In accordance with the provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1)(C) and Local Rule 2 304(f), this Court has conducted a de novo review of this case.

Having carefully 3 reviewed the entire file, the Court respectfully declines to adopt the Findings and 4 Recommendations. 5 The Findings and Recommendations recommended dismissal of Plaintiff's 6 Complaint with prejudice on qualified immunity grounds. "The doctrine of qualified 7 immunity shields officials from civil liability so long as their conduct 'does not violate 8 clearly established statutory or constitutional rights of which a reasonable person 9 would have known.'" *Mullenix v. Luna*, 577 U.S. 7,11 (2015) (per curiam) (citation 10 omitted).

At the motion to dismiss stage, an officer must show that the allegations in 11 the complaint do not make out a violation of a constitutional right or that any such 12 right was not clearly established as the time of the alleged misconduct. See *Pearson v. 13 Callahan*, 555 U.S. 223, 232–36 (2009). "[D]ismissal is not appropriate unless we can 14 determine, based on the complaint itself, that qualified immunity applies." *Polanco v. 15 Diaz*, 76 F.4th 918, 925 (9th Cir.

2023) (citation omitted). 16 Plaintiff is proceeding in this case on Eighth Amendment claims for cruel and 17 unusual punishment. Defendants move to dismiss on the grounds that Plaintiff's 18 allegations are insufficient to state a claim under the Eighth Amendment. Defendants 19 also alternatively argue that they are entitled to qualified immunity, and that Plaintiff 20 fails to state claims against Defendants in their official capacity, to the extent that he 21 intends to pursue them.

Plaintiff contends that he has plausibly stated a claim upon 22 which relief can be granted, and that Defendants are not entitled to qualified 23 immunity. 24 The Eighth Amendment's prohibition against "cruel and unusual punishments" 25 imposes duties on prison officials to provide "humane conditions of confinement." 26 *Hampton v. California*, 83 F.4th 754, 765 (9th Cir.

2023) (citing *Farmer v. Brennan*, 511 27 U.S. 825, 832 (1994)). As such, "prison officials must ensure that inmates receive 28 adequate food, clothing, shelter, and medical care" and must "take reasonable 1 measures to guarantee the safety of the inmates." *Farmer*, 511 U.S. at 832 (citation 2 and internal quotations omitted).

The protections extend to "condition[s] of 3 confinement that [are] sure or very likely to cause serious illness and needless 4 suffering" in the future. *Helling v. McKinney*, 509 U.S. 25, 33 (1993). Under these 5 circumstances, a "prison official's 'deliberate indifference' to a substantial risk of 6 serious harm to an inmate" that violates the Eighth Amendment.

Hampton, 83 F.4th at 7 766 (citation omitted). This type of claim contains an objective component: requiring 8 that the deprivation was objectively sufficiently serious, and a subjective component: 9 such that the defendant official acted with deliberate indifference to inmate health or 10 safety. *Id.* (citations omitted). 11 In *Hampton v. California*, 83 F.4th 754 (9th Cir.

2023), the Ninth Circuit held that 12 the spouse of an inmate who had died from COVID-19 in prison stated a claim of 13 deliberate indifference. In 2020, high level officials of the California prison system 14 transferred 122 inmates from the California Institute for Men, which had experienced a 15 severe COVID-19 outbreak, to San Quentin State Prison, thereby sparking an outbreak 16 of COVID-19 in San Quentin that infected over 2,000 inmates and killed over twenty- 17 five inmates.

See *Id.* at 759–60. In its decision, the Ninth Circuit addressed both the 18 objective and subject prongs of the Eighth Amendment analysis. *Id.* at 766. On the 19 objective inquiry, the Ninth Circuit recognized that the plaintiff’s complaint 20 highlighted the various steps state and local governments took to prevent exposure to 21 COVID-19. *Id.* These allegations plausibly alleged that an objective “societal 22 consensus” emerged by May 2020 that the risk of contracting COVID-19 was severe 23 such that involuntarily exposing inmates to the disease violated the then-current 24 standards of decency.

Id. The court also distinguished the circumstances in *Hines v. 25 Youseff*, 914 F.4th 1218 (9th Cir. 2019), where it had not been established that the 26 involuntary exposure to the existence of certain fungal spores constituted a violation 27 of current standards of decency amongst members of society. *Id.* Thus, the Ninth 28 Circuit concluded that the objective inquiry was satisfied.

Id. 1 Here, Plaintiff’s Complaint addresses the various efforts taken by prison staff, 2 including Defendants, to address pandemic-related risks through implementation of 3 various measures such as the designation of special housing for infected inmates, 4 rehousing inmates based on their potential exposure, and limiting movement in the 5 prison. These allegations, like the ones in *Hampton*, plausibly indicate that a “societal 6 consensus” had emerged by December 2020 to suggest that the risk of contracting 7 COVID-19 was severe such that involuntary exposure would have violated then- 8 current standards of decency.

Thus, Plaintiff has met the objective inquiry of the 9 Eighth Amendment analysis. 10 On the subjective prong, a plaintiff must show that officials were “aware of facts 11 from which the inference could be drawn that a substantial risk of serious harm exists,” 12 and must have “actually draw[n] the inference.” *Hampton*, 83 F.4th at 767. Plaintiff 13 alleges that he was ordered to move into “Facility E Yard Covid-19 Medical Tents” 14 which were for COVID-19-positive inmates.

(*Compl.* (ECF No. 1) ¶ 10.) Plaintiff did 15 not want to move and alleges that Defendant Casillas threatened him with disciplinary 16 actions and threatened to place COVID-19 positive inmates into his housing unit if he 17 did not move to the Medical Tents. (*Id.* ¶ 12.) A few days later, Plaintiff contends that 18 six new inmates were moved into his housing unit, without having a “rapid test” done, 19 from “out-patient housing” which housed inmates who were recovering from COVID- 20 19.

(Id. ¶ 13.) At the time, there was a “no-movement” order in place, given concerns 21 about COVID-19, except for mental health or medical emergencies. (Id.) Plaintiff 22 alleges that Defendant Fears forged the medical status of the six inmates, and that his 23 housing unit did not contain any beds for inmates with mental health issues. (Id.) 24 Following the transfer, Plaintiff tested positive for COVID-19 and that an explosion of 25 cases occurred in the housing unit.

(Id.) 26 At this stage, the Court finds that Plaintiff has plausibly alleged that Defendants 27 “acted...despite [their] knowledge of a substantial risk of serious harm.” Farmer, 511 28 U.S. at 842. While the Court has concerns about the plausibility of Plaintiff’s 1 allegations of forged documents, given the additional allegation that there were no 2 mental health beds in his unit and movement was otherwise restricted, the Court 3 concludes these allegations meet the standards in Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 4 U.S. 544 (2007) and Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662 (2009).

Taken as true, the 5 allegations indicate that Defendants were aware that COVID-19 would cause Plaintiff 6 harm and proceeded to act in a way that would endanger Plaintiff, particularly in terms 7 of the threat to move in COVID-19-positive patients and the circumstances 8 surrounding the transfer of the inmates.

Accordingly, the Court finds that the 9 subjective prong of the Eighth Amendment analysis is met. 10 The Court also finds that the right at issue was clearly established at the time of 11 the violation. See Stewart v. Aranas, 32 F.4th 1192, 1195 (9th Cir. 2022).

For an 12 officer’s unlawful conduct to be “clearly established” it must be true that “at the time of 13 the officer’s conduct, the law was sufficiently clear that every reasonable official would 14 understand that what he is doing is unlawful.” District of Columbia v. Wesby, 583 U.S. 15 48, 63 (2018) (citations and quotation marks omitted).

In Hampton, the Ninth Circuit 16 explained that the right to be free from exposure to a serious disease has been clearly 17 established since at least 1993, when the Supreme Court decided Helling v. 18 McKinney, 509 U.S. 25 (1993). Hampton, 83 F.4th at 770.

The Hampton court detailed 19 several Ninth Circuit cases that made this right clearly established by the spring of 20 2020. Id. at 771 (collecting cases showing that the Eighth Amendment clearly 21 required prison officials to protect inmates from exposure to serious diseases). If the 22 law was clearly established in spring of 2020, then it certainly was clearly established 23 in December 2020, which is when Plaintiff alleges these incidents occurred.

24 Accordingly, the Court finds that reasonable prison officials would have been on 25 notice that they could be held liable for exposing inmates to a serious disease. 26 ACCORDINGLY, IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that: 27 1.

The Court declines to adopt the Findings and Recommendations (ECF No. 28 31); 1 2. Plaintiff's Motion to Vacate Defendants' Response (ECF No. 37) is DENIED; 2 3. Defendants' Motion to Dismiss (ECF No. 18) is DENIED; and 3 4. This matter is referred back to the Magistrate Judge for all further pretrial 4 proceedings. 5 6 IT IS SO ORDERED. 7 | Dated: _September 30, 2025 "Daal A CoO □□□□ Hon. Daniel alabretta 8 UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE 9 10 11 | Dyce - MORGAN23cv01018.jo_v1 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28