
THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
DISTRICT OF UTAH

VIVEK LAKHUMNA,

Plaintiff,

v.

UINTAH COUNTY et al.,

Defendants.

**MEMORANDUM DECISION & ORDER
TO CURE DEFICIENT COMPLAINT**

Case No. 2:23-cv-00387-DBB

District Judge David Barlow

Plaintiff, self-represented inmate Vivek Lakumna, brings this civil-rights action, *see* 42 U.S.C.S. § 1983 (2023), proceeding without prepaying the filing fee, *see* 28 *id.* § 1915. (ECF Nos. 1-3.) Having now screened the Complaint, (ECF No. 3), under its statutory review function, 28 U.S.C.S. § 1915A (2023), the Court orders Plaintiff to file an amended complaint to cure deficiencies before further pursuing claims.

COMPLAINT’S DEFICIENCIES

Complaint:

(a) improperly names Uintah County Jail (UCJ) as a § 1983 defendant, when it is not an independent legal entity that can sue or be sued. *See Smith v. Lawton Corr. Facility*, No. CIV-18-110-C, 2018 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 45488, at *5 (W.D. Okla. Mar. 7, 2018) (stating correctional facilities “not suable entities in a § 1983 action”).

(b) purports to bring a class action, when Plaintiff may not represent a class as a *pro se* litigant. *See McGoldrick v. Werholtz*, 185 F. App’x 741, 744 (10th Cir. 2006) (unpublished) (“[B]ecause plaintiffs are *pro se*, the district court would have abused its discretion if it had certified a class action.” (citing *Fymbo v. State Farm Fire & Cas. Co.*, 213 F.3d 1320, 1321 (10th Cir. 2000) (stating class representatives may not appear *pro se*); *Oxendine v. Williams*, 509 F.2d 1405, 1407 (4th Cir. 1975) (holding *pro se* prisoners are not adequate representatives for class); 7A Charles Alan Wright, Arthur R. Miller & Mary Kay Kane, *Federal Practice and Procedure* § 1769.1 at 450 & n.13 (3d ed. 2005) (stating rule that “class representatives cannot appear *pro se*,” and citing supporting case law))).

(c) possibly improperly alleges civil-rights violations on a respondeat-superior theory. (See below.)

(d) does not indicate whether Plaintiff sues Defendants in their individual and/or official capacities and evince an understanding of how this bears on county liability. (See below.)

(e) does not adequately specify factual allegations meeting the elements of municipal liability under which an attacked policy could be held unconstitutional. (See below.)

(f) does not adequately specify factual allegations meeting the elements of a First Amendment cause of action. (See below.)

GUIDANCE FOR PLAINTIFF

Rule 8 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure requires a complaint to contain “(1) a short and plain statement of the grounds for the court’s jurisdiction . . . ; (2) a short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief; and (3) a demand for the relief sought.” Rule 8’s requirements mean to guarantee “that defendants enjoy fair notice of what the claims against them are and the grounds upon which they rest.” *TV Comme ’ns Network, Inc. v ESPN, Inc.*, 767 F. Supp. 1062, 1069 (D. Colo. 1991).

Pro se litigants are not excused from meeting these minimal pleading demands. “This is so because a pro se plaintiff requires no special legal training to recount the facts surrounding his alleged injury, and he must provide such facts if the court is to determine whether he makes out a claim on which relief can be granted.” *Hall v. Bellmon*, 935 F.2d 1106, 1110 (10th Cir. 1991). Moreover, it is improper for the Court “to assume the role of advocate for a pro se litigant.” *Id.* Thus, the Court cannot “supply additional facts, [or] construct a legal theory for plaintiff that assumes facts that have not been pleaded.” *Dunn v. White*, 880 F.2d 1188, 1197 (10th Cir. 1989).

Plaintiff should consider these general points before filing an amended complaint:

(i) The revised complaint must stand entirely on its own and shall not refer to, or incorporate by reference, any part of the original complaint. *See Murray v. Archambo*, 132 F.3d 609, 612 (10th Cir. 1998) (stating amended complaint supersedes original). An amended complaint may also not be added to after it is filed without moving for amendment. Fed. R. Civ. P. 15.

(ii) The complaint must clearly state what each individual defendant--typically, a named government employee--did to violate Plaintiff's civil rights. *See Bennett v. Passic*, 545 F.2d 1260, 1262-63 (10th Cir. 1976) (stating personal participation of each named defendant is essential allegation in civil-rights action). "To state a claim, a complaint must 'make clear exactly *who* is alleged to have done *what* to *whom*.'" *Stone v. Albert*, 338 F. App'x 757, 759 (10th Cir. 2009) (unpublished) (emphasis in original) (quoting *Robbins v. Oklahoma*, 519 F.3d 1242, 1250 (10th Cir. 2008)). Plaintiff should also include, as much as possible, specific dates or at least estimates of when alleged constitutional violations occurred.

(iii) Each cause of action, together with the facts and citations that directly support it, should be stated separately. Plaintiff should be as brief as possible while still using enough words to fully explain the "who," "what," "where," "when," and "why" of each claim. *Robbins*, 519 F.3d at 1248 ("The [*Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*] Court was particularly critical of complaints that 'mentioned no specific, time, place, or person involved in the alleged [claim].' [550 U.S. 544, 565] n.10 (2007). Given such a complaint, 'a defendant seeking to respond to plaintiff's conclusory allegations . . . would have little idea where to begin.' *Id.*").

(iv) Plaintiff may not name an individual as a defendant based solely on supervisory position. *See Mitchell v. Maynard*, 80 F.2d 1433, 1441 (10th Cir. 1996) (stating supervisory status alone does not support § 1983 liability).

(v) Grievance denial alone with no connection to “violation of constitutional rights alleged by plaintiff, does not establish personal participation under § 1983.” *Gallagher v. Shelton*, 587 F.3d 1063, 1069 (10th Cir. 2009).

(vi) “No action shall be brought with respect to prison conditions under . . . Federal law, by a prisoner confined in any jail, prison, or other correctional facility until such administrative remedies as are available are exhausted.” 42 U.S.C.S. § 1997e(a) (2023). However, Plaintiff need not include grievance details in the complaint. Exhaustion of administrative remedies is an affirmative defense that must be raised by defendants. *Jones v. Bock*, 549 U.S. 199, 216 (2007).

• **Respondeat superior**

The Supreme Court holds that, in asserting a § 1983 claim against a government agent in their individual capacity, “a plaintiff must plead that each Government-official defendant, through the official's own individual actions, has violated the Constitution.” *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662 676 (2009). Consequently, there is no respondeat superior liability under § 1983. *See Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 676 (“Because vicarious liability is inapplicable to *Bivens* and § 1983 suits, a plaintiff must plead that each Government-official defendant, through the official's own individual actions, has violated the Constitution.”); *Bd. of Cty. Comm'rs v. Brown*, 520 U.S. 397, 403 (1997). Entities may not be held liable on the sole ground of an employer-employee relationship with a claimed tortfeasor. *See Monell v. Dep't of Soc. Servs. of N.Y.*, 436 U.S. 658, 689 (1978). Supervisors are considered liable for their own unconstitutional or illegal

policies only, and not for employees' tortious acts. *See Barney v. Pulsipher*, 143 F.3d 1299, 1307-08 (10th Cir. 1998).

• **Official capacity versus individual capacity**

The United States Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit explains:

The Supreme Court has instructed that "official-capacity suits generally represent only another way of pleading an action against an entity of which an officer is an agent." *Hafer v. Melo*, 502 U.S. 21, 25 (1991) (cleaned up). By contrast, individual-capacity suits "seek to impose individual liability upon a government officer for actions taken under color of state law." *Id.*

Coates v. Reigenborn, Nos. 22-1339 & 22-1434, 2023 U.S. App. LEXIS 27456, at *9-10 (10th Cir. Oct. 16, 2023) (unpublished); *see also Mocek v. City of Albuquerque*, 813 F.3d 912, 932 (10th Cir. 2015) ("A suit against a government agent in his official capacity is treated as a suit against the government.").

One difference between suing a defendant in an official versus individual capacity has to do with averring causation. To adequately assert causation against a defendant in an individual capacity, the plaintiff must allege facts showing that the defendant "set in motion a series of events that he knew or reasonably should have known would cause others to deprive [the plaintiff] of her constitutional rights." *Perry v. Durborow*, 892 F.3d 1116, 1122 (10th Cir. 2018) (cleaned up); *see also Cox v. Glanz*, 800 F.3d 1231, 1254 (10th Cir. 2015) ("When confronting individual-capacity § 1983 claims, our focus must always be on the *defendant*--on the injury *he* inflicted or caused to be inflicted, and on *his* motives." (cleaned up)). Conversely, to adequately assert causation against a defendant in an official capacity, the plaintiff must first identify an official policy or custom, and then establish that the challenged policy or custom was the "'moving force' behind the injury alleged." *Brown*, 520 U.S. at 404.

Plaintiff should keep in mind too that “it makes no sense to sue a governmental entity in its individual capacity.” *Jackson-Mackay v. McDonald*, No. 22-8033, 2023 U.S. App. LEXIS 6356, at *2 (10th Cir. Mar. 17, 2023). And, finally, “there is no longer a need to bring official-capacity actions against local government officials, for under *Monell*, local government units can be sued directly for damages and injunctive or declaratory relief.” *Kentucky v. Graham*, 473 U.S. 159, 167 n.14 (1985) (citing *Monell*, 436 U.S. at 658).

• **Municipal liability principles**

Plaintiff should study and incorporate these general principles in reframing the Complaint’s municipal liability claim:

In addition to a constitutional violation, a plaintiff must satisfy three elements to succeed on a *Monell* claim: “(1) an official policy or custom, (2) causation, and (3) deliberate indifference.” *Lucas v. Turn Key Health Clinics, LLC*, 58 F.4th 1127, 1145 (10th Cir. 2023).

An official policy or custom may include:

(1) a formal regulation or policy statement; (2) an informal custom amounting to a widespread practice that, although not authorized by written law or express municipal policy, is so permanent and well settled as to constitute a custom or usage with the force of law; (3) the decisions of employees with final policymaking authority; (4) the ratification by such final policymakers of the decisions--and the basis for them--of subordinates to whom authority was delegated subject to these policymakers' review and approval; or (5) the failure to adequately train or supervise employees, so long as that failure results from deliberate indifference to the injuries that may be caused.

Id. (quotations omitted). “For causation . . . the challenged policy or practice must be closely related to the violation of the plaintiff’s federally protected right.” *Hinkle v. Beckham Cnty. Bd. of Cnty. Comm’rs*, 962 F.3d 1204, 1241 (10th Cir. 2020) (quotations omitted). The policy or custom must be “the moving force behind the injury alleged.” *Schneider v. City of Grand Junction Police Dep’t*, 717 F.3d 760, 770 (10th Cir. 2013) (quotations omitted). And “[a] local government policymaker is deliberately indifferent when he deliberately or consciously fails to act when presented with an obvious risk of constitutional harm [that] will almost inevitably result in constitutional injury of the type experienced by the plaintiff.” *Burke v. Regalado*, 935 F.3d 960, 997-98 (10th Cir. 2019) (quotations omitted).

Buchanan v. Turn Key Health Clinics, LLC, No. 22-7029, 2023 U.S. App. LEXIS 28156, at *18-21 (10th Cir. Oct. 24, 2023) (unpublished).

• **Stating a First Amendment claim**

“Inmates have a First Amendment right to receive information while in prison to the extent the right is not inconsistent with prisoner status or the legitimate penological objectives of the prison.” *Jacklovich v. Simmons*, 392 F.3d 420, 426 (10th Cir. 2004). Thus, to adequately state a First Amendment claim in a § 1983 complaint, a prisoner “must include sufficient facts to indicate the plausibility that the actions of which he complains were not reasonably related to legitimate penological interests.” *Gee v. Pacheco*, 627 F.3d 1178, 1187-88 (10th Cir. 2010). A prisoner need not “identify every potential legitimate interest and plead against it.” *Id.* Still, the prisoner must “plead facts from which a plausible inference can be drawn that the action was not reasonably related to a legitimate penological interest.” *Id.* This may compel the inmate to “recite[] facts that might well be unnecessary in other contexts. For example, . . . a prisoner claim may not be plausible unless it alleges facts that explain why the usual justifications for the complained-of acts do not apply.” *Id.* at 1185.

ORDER

IT IS HEREBY ORDERED as follows:

(1) Plaintiff must within thirty days cure the Complaint's deficiencies noted above by filing a document entitled, "Amended Complaint," that does not refer to or include any other document. (ECF No. 3.)

(2) The Clerk's Office shall mail Plaintiff the Pro Se Litigant Guide with a blank-form civil-rights complaint which Plaintiff must use if Plaintiff wishes to pursue an amended complaint.

(3) If Plaintiff fails to timely cure the above deficiencies according to this Order's instructions, this action will be dismissed without further notice.

(4) The amended complaint shall not include any claims outside the dates and allegations of transactions and events contained in the Complaint, filed June 14, 2023, (ECF No. 3). The Court will not address any such new claims or outside allegations, which will be dismissed. If Plaintiff wishes to raise other claims and allegations, Plaintiff may do so only in a new complaint in a new case. If an amended complaint is filed, the Court will screen each claim and defendant for dismissal or an order effecting service upon valid defendants who are affirmatively linked to valid claims.

(5) Plaintiff shall not try to serve an amended complaint on any defendants; instead, the Court will perform its screening function and determine itself whether the amended complaint warrants service or dismissal (in part or in full). No motion for service of process is needed. *See* 28 U.S.C.S. § 1915(d) (2023) ("The officers of the court shall issue and serve all process, and perform all duties in [*in forma pauperis*] cases.").

(6) Plaintiff must tell the Court of any address change and timely comply with Court orders. *See* D. Utah Civ. R. 83-1.6(b) (“An unrepresented party must immediately notify the Clerk's Office in writing of any name, mailing address, or email address changes.”). Failure to do so may result in this action's dismissal for failure to prosecute. *See* Fed. R. Civ. P. 41(b) (“If the plaintiff fails to prosecute or to comply with these rules or a court order, a defendant may move to dismiss the action or any claim against it. Unless the dismissal order states otherwise, a dismissal under this subdivision (b) and any dismissal not under this rule--except one for lack of jurisdiction, improper venue, or failure to join a party under Rule 19--operates as an adjudication on the merits.”).

(7) Extensions of time are disfavored, though reasonable extensions may be granted. Any motion for time extension must be filed no later than **fourteen days** before the deadline to be extended.

(8) No direct communication is to take place with any judge. All relevant information, letters, documents, and papers, labeled with case number, are to be directed to the Clerk of Court.

(9) Plaintiff must observe the following District of Utah local rule: “A party proceeding without an attorney (unrepresented party or *pro se* party) is obligated to comply with: (1) the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure; (2) these Local Rules of Practice; (3) the Utah Standards of Professionalism and Civility; and (4) other laws and rules relevant to the action.” DUCivR 83-1.6(a).

DATED this 8th day of February, 2024.

BY THE COURT:



JUDGE DAVID BARLOW
United States District Court