

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
DISTRICT OF NEW JERSEY

HUSCHEL B. STORY,	:	
	:	Civil Action No. 11-5340 (RBK)
Plaintiff,	:	
	:	
v.	:	OPINION
	:	
ATLANTIC CITY POLICE	:	
DEPARTMENT, et al.,	:	
	:	
Defendants.	:	

APPEARANCES:

Plaintiff pro se
Huschel B. Story
Atlantic County Justice Facility
Mays Landing, NJ 08330

KUGLER, District Judge

Plaintiff Huschel B. Story, a pre-trial detainee confined at Atlantic County Justice Facility in Mays Landing, New Jersey, seeks to bring this action in forma pauperis pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983, alleging violations of his constitutional rights. Based on his affidavit of indigence and the absence of three qualifying dismissals within 28 U.S.C. §1915(g), the Court will grant Plaintiff's application to proceed in forma pauperis pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a) and order the Clerk of the Court to file the Complaint.

At this time, the Court must review the Complaint to determine whether it should be dismissed as frivolous or

malicious, for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or because it seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief.

I. BACKGROUND

The following factual allegations are taken from Plaintiff's Complaint and are accepted as true for purposes of this review.

Plaintiff alleges that he was arrested by Defendants M. Braxton and Frank Timex, officers of the Defendant Atlantic City Police Department. He alleges that he did not resist arrest and that after he was secured Officer Braxton beat him in the head and back. Plaintiff alleges that, during the beating, Officer Timex allowed his police dog to bite Plaintiff. Plaintiff also alleges that the arresting officers failed to give him any Miranda¹ warnings.

Plaintiff seeks monetary damages.

II. STANDARDS FOR A SUA SPONTE DISMISSAL

This Court must dismiss, at the earliest practicable time, certain in forma pauperis and prisoner actions that are frivolous, malicious, fail to state a claim, or seek monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. See 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e) (2) (in forma pauperis actions); 28 U.S.C. § 1915A (actions in which prisoner seeks redress from a

¹ Miranda v. Arizona, 384 U.S. 436 (1966).

governmental defendant); 42 U.S.C. § 1997e (prisoner actions brought with respect to prison conditions).

In determining the sufficiency of a pro se complaint, the Court must be mindful to construe it liberally in favor of the plaintiff. Haines v. Kerner, 404 U.S. 519, 520-21 (1972); United States v. Day, 969 F.2d 39, 42 (3d Cir. 1992). The Court must "accept as true all of the allegations in the complaint and all reasonable inferences that can be drawn therefrom, and view them in the light most favorable to the plaintiff." Morse v. Lower Merion School Dist., 132 F.3d 902, 906 (3d Cir. 1997).

In addition, any complaint must comply with the pleading requirements of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure.

Rule 8(a)(2) requires that a complaint contain "a short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief." A complaint must plead facts sufficient at least to "suggest" a basis for liability. Spruill v. Gillis, 372 F.3d 218, 236 n.12 (3d Cir. 2004). "Specific facts are not necessary; the statement need only 'give the defendant fair notice of what the ... claim is and the grounds upon which it rests.'" Erickson v. Pardus, 551 U.S. 89, 93 (2007) (citations omitted).

While a complaint ... does not need detailed factual allegations, a plaintiff's obligation to provide the "grounds" of his "entitle[ment] to relief" requires more than labels and conclusions, and a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of action will not do, see Papasan v. Allain, 478 U.S. 265, 286, 106 S.Ct. 2932, 92 L.Ed.2d 209 (1986) (on a motion to dismiss, courts "are not bound to accept as true a

legal conclusion couched as a factual allegation"). Factual allegations must be enough to raise a right to relief above the speculative level

Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007)

(citations omitted).

The Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has held that the Twombly pleading standard applies in civil rights actions. See Phillips v. County of Allegheny, 515 F.3d 224, 234 (3d Cir. 2008).

Context matters in notice pleading. Fair notice under Rule 8(a)(2) depends on the type of case -- some complaints will require at least some factual allegations to make out a "showing that the pleader is entitled to relief, in order to give the defendant fair notice of what the ... claim is and the grounds upon which it rests." Indeed, taking Twombly and the Court's contemporaneous opinion in Erickson v. Pardus, 127 S.Ct. 2197 (2007), together, we understand the Court to instruct that a situation may arise where, at some point, the factual detail in a complaint is so undeveloped that it does not provide a defendant the type of notice of claim which is contemplated by Rule 8. Put another way, in light of Twombly, Rule 8(a)(2) requires a "showing" rather than a blanket assertion of an entitlement to relief. We caution that without some factual allegation in the complaint, a claimant cannot satisfy the requirement that he or she provide not only "fair notice," but also the "grounds" on which the claim rests.

Phillips, 515 F.3d at 232 (citations omitted).

More recently, the Supreme Court has emphasized that, when assessing the sufficiency of any civil complaint, a court must distinguish factual contentions -- which allege behavior on the part of the defendant that, if true, would satisfy one or more elements of the claim asserted -- and "[t]hreadbare recitals of

the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements.” Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009).

Although the Court must assume the veracity of the facts asserted in the complaint, it is “not bound to accept as true a legal conclusion couched as a factual allegation.” Id. (citation omitted). Thus, “a court considering a motion to dismiss can choose to begin by identifying pleadings that, because they are no more than conclusions, are not entitled to the assumption of truth.” Id. at 679.

Therefore, after Iqbal, when presented with a motion to dismiss for failure to state a claim, district courts should conduct a two-part analysis. First, the factual and legal elements of a claim should be separated. The District Court must accept all of the complaint's well-pleaded facts as true, but may disregard any legal conclusions. Second, a District Court must then determine whether the facts alleged in the complaint are sufficient to show that the plaintiff has a “plausible claim for relief.” In other words, a complaint must do more than allege the plaintiff's entitlement to relief. A complaint has to “show” such an entitlement with its facts. See Phillips, 515 F.3d at 234-35. As the Supreme Court instructed in Iqbal, “[w]here the well-pleaded facts do not permit the court to infer more than the mere possibility of misconduct, the complaint has alleged-but it has not ‘show[n]’-‘that the pleader is entitled to relief.’” This “plausibility” determination will be “a context-specific task that requires the reviewing court to draw on its judicial experience and common sense.”

Fowler v. UPMC Shadyside, 578 F.3d 203, 210-11 (3d Cir. 2009)

(citations omitted).

Where a complaint can be remedied by an amendment, a district court may not dismiss the complaint with prejudice, but

must permit the amendment. Denton v. Hernandez, 504 U.S. 25, 34 (1992); Grayson v. Mayview State Hospital, 293 F.3d 103, 108 (3d Cir. 2002) (dismissal pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)); Shane v. Fauver, 213 F.3d 113, 116-17 (3d Cir. 2000) (dismissal pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c)(1)); Urrutia v. Harrisburg County Police Dept., 91 F.3d 451, 453 (3d Cir. 1996).

III. SECTION 1983 ACTIONS

A plaintiff may have a cause of action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 for certain violations of his constitutional rights. Section 1983 provides in relevant part:

Every person who, under color of any statute, ordinance, regulation, custom, or usage, of any State or Territory ... subjects, or causes to be subjected, any citizen of the United States or other person within the jurisdiction thereof to the deprivation of any rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws, shall be liable to the party injured in an action at law, suit in equity, or other proper proceeding for redress

Thus, to state a claim for relief under § 1983, a plaintiff must allege, first, the violation of a right secured by the Constitution or laws of the United States and, second, that the alleged deprivation was committed or caused by a person acting under color of state law. West v. Atkins, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988); Piecknick v. Pennsylvania, 36 F.3d 1250, 1255-56 (3d Cir. 1994).

Local government units and supervisors are not liable under § 1983 solely on a theory of respondeat superior. See City of

Oklahoma City v. Tuttle, 471 U.S. 808, 824 n.8 (1985); Monell v. New York City Department of Social Services, 436 U.S. 658, 690-91, 694 (1978) (municipal liability attaches only "when execution of a government's policy or custom, whether made by its lawmakers or by those whose edicts or acts may fairly be said to represent official policy, inflicts the injury" complained of); Natale v. Camden County Correctional Facility, 318 F.3d 575, 583-84 (3d Cir. 2003). "A defendant in a civil rights action must have personal involvement in the alleged wrongs, liability cannot be predicated solely on the operation of respondeat superior. Personal involvement can be shown through allegations of personal direction or of actual knowledge and acquiescence." Rode v. Dellarciprete, 845 F.2d 1195, 1207 (3d Cir. 1988) (citations omitted). Accord Robinson v. City of Pittsburgh, 120 F.3d 1286, 1293-96 (3d Cir. 1997); Baker v. Monroe Twp., 50 F.3d 1186, 1190-91 (3d Cir. 1995).

To establish municipal liability under § 1983, "a plaintiff must show that an official who has the power to make policy is responsible for either the affirmative proclamation of a policy or acquiescence in a well-settled custom." Bielevicz v. Dubinon, 915 F.2d 845, 850 (3d Cir. 1990), quoted in Blanche Rd. Corp. v. Bensalem Twp., 57 F.3d 253, 269 n.16 (3d Cir.), cert. denied, 516 U.S. 915 (1995), and quoted in Woodwind Estates, Ltd. v. Gretkowski, 205 F.3d 118, 126 (3d Cir. 2000). A plaintiff must

demonstrate that, through its deliberate conduct, the municipality was the moving force behind the plaintiff's injury. Monell, 436 U.S. at 689.

A policy is made "when a decisionmaker possess[ing] final authority to establish municipal policy with respect to the action issues a final proclamation, policy or edict." Kneipp v. Tedder, 95 F.3d 1199, 1212 (3d Cir. 1996) (quoting Pembaur v. City of Cincinnati, 475 U.S. 469, 481, 106 S.Ct. 1292, 89 L.Ed.2d 452 (1986) (plurality opinion)). A custom is an act "that has not been formally approved by an appropriate decisionmaker," but that is "so widespread as to have the force of law." [Bd. of County Comm'rs of Bryan County, Oklahoma v. Brown, 520 U.S. 397, 404 (1997).]

There are three situations where acts of a government employee may be deemed to be the result of a policy or custom of the governmental entity for whom the employee works, thereby rendering the entity liable under § 1983. The first is where "the appropriate officer or entity promulgates a generally applicable statement of policy and the subsequent act complained of is simply an implementation of that policy." The second occurs where "no rule has been announced as policy but federal law has been violated by an act of the policymaker itself." Finally, a policy or custom may also exist where "the policymaker has failed to act affirmatively at all, [though] the need to take some action to control the agents of the government 'is so obvious, and the inadequacy of existing practice so likely to result in the violation of constitutional rights, that the policymaker can reasonably be said to have been deliberately indifferent to the need.'"

Natale, 318 F.3d at 584 (footnote and citations omitted).

Here, Plaintiff has alleged no facts suggesting that the circumstances of his arrest resulted from any policy or practice of the Atlantic City Police Department. Accordingly, the claims against the Police Department will be dismissed with prejudice.

IV. ANALYSIS

A. The "Miranda" Claim

Plaintiff alleges that the arresting officers failed to give him any Miranda warnings.

In Miranda v. Arizona, 384 U.S. 436 (1966), the Supreme Court set forth certain procedural safeguards that must be employed, to protect an individual's Fifth Amendment privilege against self-incrimination, whenever authorities take an individual into custody, or otherwise deprive him of his freedom in any significant way, and subject him to questioning.

Our holding will be spelled out with some specificity in the pages which follow but briefly stated it is this: the prosecution may not use statements, whether exculpatory or inculpatory, stemming from custodial interrogation of the defendant unless it demonstrates the use of procedural safeguards effective to secure the privilege against self-incrimination. By custodial interrogation, we mean questioning initiated by law enforcement officers after a person has been taken into custody or otherwise deprived of his freedom of action in any significant way. As for the procedural safeguards to be employed, unless other fully effective means are devised to inform accused persons of their right of silence and to assure a continuous opportunity to exercise it, the following measures are required. Prior to any questioning, the person must be warned that he has a right to remain silent, that any statement he does make may be used as evidence against him, and that he has a right to the presence of an attorney, either retained or appointed. The defendant may waive effectuation of these rights, provided the waiver is made voluntarily, knowingly and intelligently. If, however, he indicates in any manner and at any stage of the process that he wishes to consult with an attorney before speaking there can be no questioning. Likewise, if the individual is alone and indicates in any manner that he does not wish to be interrogated, the police may not question him. The mere

fact that he may have answered some questions or volunteered some statements on his own does not deprive him of the right to refrain from answering any further inquiries until he has consulted with an attorney and thereafter consents to be questioned.

Miranda v. Arizona, 384 U.S. at 444-445 (footnote omitted).

To the extent Plaintiff seeks to assert a claim for damages based directly upon the failure to give a proper Miranda warning, or questioning or acquisition of a statement in violation of his Miranda warning rights, he fails to state a claim. “[V]iolations of the prophylactic Miranda procedures do not amount to violations of the Constitution itself. ... The right protected under the Fifth Amendment is the right not to be compelled to be a witness against oneself in a criminal prosecution, whereas the ‘right to counsel’ during custodial interrogation recognized in [Miranda] is merely a procedural safeguard and not a substantive right.” Giuffre v. Bissell, 31 F.3d 1241, 1256 (3d Cir. 1994) (citations omitted). Thus, Plaintiff has no free-standing Fifth Amendment right to remain silent during interrogation. Nor does Plaintiff have a free-standing Fifth Amendment claim for denial of the right to counsel during questioning. See James v. York County Police Dept., 160 Fed.Appx. 126, 133, 2005 WL 3313029, 5 (3d Cir. 2005) (citing Giuffre). In addition, a person’s Sixth Amendment right to counsel “attaches only at or after the time that adversary judicial proceedings have been initiated against

him.” Kirby v. Illinois, 406 U.S. 682, 688 (1972) (plurality opinion).

Plaintiff also has asked for dismissal of the state criminal charges against him. It is not generally the role of the federal courts to interfere in pending state judicial proceedings. A federal court must abstain from addressing requests for injunctive relief against state court proceedings so long as the constitutional issues involved may be addressed adequately in the course of the state proceedings. Younger v. Harris, 401 U.S. 37 (1971) (addressing abstention from state criminal proceedings). The United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has enunciated three requirements that must be met before Younger abstention may be invoked:

(1) there are ongoing state proceedings that are judicial in nature; (2) the state proceedings implicate important state interests; and (3) the state proceedings afford an adequate opportunity to raise federal claims. Whenever all three of these requirements are satisfied, abstention is appropriate absent a showing of bad faith prosecution, harassment, or a patently unconstitutional rule that will cause irreparable injury to the plaintiff.

Port Auth. Police Benevolent Ass’n Inc. v. Port Auth. Of New York and New Jersey Police Dept., 973 F.2d 169, 173 (3d Cir. 1992) (citing Schall v. Joyce, 885 F.2d 101, 106 (3d Cir. 1989)). All three predicates are present here; this Court will not interfere with Plaintiff’s ongoing state criminal proceedings.

Insofar as Plaintiff seeks a declaratory judgment that his Miranda rights were violated, see 28 U.S.C. § 2201 (Federal Declaratory Judgment Act), he is not entitled to such relief.

Where a state criminal prosecution has begun before initiation of a federal declaratory judgment action, equitable principles preclude the granting of declaratory relief that might disrupt state criminal proceedings except in very unusual circumstances, where the plaintiff has no adequate remedy at law in the state criminal proceeding or where necessary to prevent immediate irreparable injury. See Samuels v. Mackell, 401 U.S. 66 (1971); Younger v. Harris, 401 U.S. 37 (1971); Schall v. Joyce, 885 F.2d 101, 106 (3d Cir. 1989) (applied in Anthony v. Council, 316 F.3d 412 (3d Cir. 2003) (in which plaintiffs sought declaratory and injunctive relief related to state child support proceedings)). Again, Plaintiff has alleged no facts that would justify the granting of declaratory relief that might interfere with his criminal proceedings.

This Court expresses no opinion as to whether the circumstances of the interrogation or the use at trial of any statement obtained from Plaintiff would violate the Miranda rule.

B. Excessive Force in Arrest

Plaintiff alleges that he did not resist arrest, but that Officer Braxton beat him and that Officer Timex permitted his police dog to bite Plaintiff.

The Fourth Amendment to the United States Constitution provides that "The right of the people to be secure in their persons ... against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated."

"To state a claim for excessive force as an unreasonable seizure under the Fourth Amendment, a plaintiff must show that a 'seizure' occurred and that it was unreasonable." Brower v. County of Inyo, 489 U.S. 593, 599 (1989), quoted in Abraham v. Raso, 183 F.3d 279, 288 (3d Cir. 1999). See also Graham v. Connor, 490 U.S. 386, 395 (1989) ("all claims that law enforcement officers have used excessive force--deadly or not--in the course of an arrest, investigatory stop, or other 'seizure' of a free citizen should be analyzed under the Fourth Amendment and its 'reasonableness' standard").

A seizure triggering Fourth Amendment protection occurs when a government actor "by means of physical force or show of authority, has in some way restrained the liberty of a citizen." Terry v. Ohio, 392 U.S. 1, 19 n.16 (1968).

To determine the reasonableness of a seizure, a court "must balance the nature and quality of the intrusion on the individual's Fourth Amendment interests against the importance of the governmental interests alleged to justify the intrusion." United States v. Place, 462 U.S. 696, 703 (1983), quoted in Tennessee v. Garner, 471 U.S. 1, 8 (1985) and Graham v. Connor,

490 U.S. 386, 396 (1989). Proper application of this objective reasonableness standard "requires careful attention to the facts and circumstances of each particular case, including the severity of the crime at issue, whether the suspect poses an immediate threat to the safety of the officers or others, and whether he is actively resisting arrest or attempting to evade arrest by flight." Graham v. Connor, 490 U.S. at 396; quoted in Groman v. Township of Manalapan, 47 F.3d 628, 633 (3d Cir. 1995).

Ultimately, "the question is whether the officers' actions are 'objectively reasonable' in light of the facts and circumstances confronting them, without regard to their underlying intent or motivation." Graham, 490 U.S. at 397.

Here, Plaintiff has alleged facts sufficient to permit a Fourth Amendment "excessive force" claim to proceed as against Defendant Officers Braxton and Timex.

V. CONCLUSION

For the reasons set forth above, the Fourth Amendment "excessive force" claim may proceed as against Defendant Officers Braxton and Timex only. All other claims will be dismissed with prejudice, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii) and 1915A(b)(1), for failure to state a claim. An appropriate order follows.

s/Robert B. Kugler
Robert B. Kugler
United States District Judge

Dated: September 27, 2012

