

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
DISTRICT OF NEW JERSEY**

_____	:	
STANLEY L. NIBLACK,	:	
	:	
Plaintiff,	:	Civil No. 09-6227 (AET)
	:	
v.	:	
	:	
WILLIAM WACKOWSKI, ESQ.,	:	OPINION
et al.,	:	
	:	
Defendants.	:	
_____	:	

APPEARANCES:

STANLEY L. NIBLACK, Plaintiff pro se
204 Stevenson Avenue
Edgewater Park, New Jersey 08010

THOMPSON, District Judge

Plaintiff, Stanley L. Niblack, a convicted state prisoner confined at the Northern State Prison in Newark, New Jersey, at the time he submitted his Complaint for filing, seeks to bring this action in forma pauperis ("IFP"). Based on Plaintiff's affidavit of indigence, the Court will grant the application to proceed in forma pauperis pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a) (1998) and order the Clerk of the Court to file the Complaint accordingly.

At this time, the Court must review the Complaint, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B) and 1915A, 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. For the reasons set forth below, the Court concludes that the Complaint should be dismissed in its entirety at this time.

I. BACKGROUND

Plaintiff, Stanley L. Niblack ("Niblack"), brings this civil action, pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983, against the following defendants: William Wackowski, Esq., Public Defender's Office; Theodore Fishman, Deputy Public Defender; Monmouth County Public Defender's Office; Luis Valentin, Esq., Monmouth County Prosecutor; Jacquelynn Seely, Esq., Assistant Prosecutor; Patricia Quelch, Assistant Prosecutor; Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office; the Honorable Ira E. Kreizman, J.S.C.; and Daniel Straffi, Esq. (Complaint, Caption, ¶¶ 1, 4b-d). The following factual allegations are taken from the Complaint, and are accepted for purposes of this screening only. The Court has made no findings as to the veracity of plaintiff's allegations.

Niblack alleges that defendant Wackowski had been assigned to represent him on his re-sentencing ordered by the Supreme Court of New Jersey. Defendant Straffi was assigned to represent plaintiff in his state post-conviction relief ("PCR") proceedings. It is unclear from the Complaint whether defendant Fishman also had been assigned to represent Niblack in any of his

state court proceedings. On August 8, 2008, Niblack alleges that Wackowski informed plaintiff after many adjournments that Niblack would have to represent himself. Essentially, Niblack alleges that Wackowski deprived him of his right to counsel and effective assistance of counsel in violation of his Sixth Amendment rights. He baldly claims that all of the defendants conspired to deprive plaintiff of his right to counsel. (Compl., ¶ 6).

Niblack seeks \$100,000.00 from each named defendant as compensatory, actual and punitive damages. He also seeks injunctive relief in the form of a consent decree stopping defendants from conspiring to deprive plaintiff of the right to counsel. (Compl., ¶ 7).

II. STANDARDS FOR A SUA SPONTE DISMISSAL

The Prison Litigation Reform Act ("PLRA"), Pub. L. No. 104-134, §§ 801-810, 110 Stat. 1321-66 to 1321-77 (April 26, 1996), requires a district court to review a complaint in a civil action in which a prisoner is proceeding in forma pauperis or seeks redress against a governmental employee or entity. The Court is required to identify cognizable claims and to sua sponte dismiss any claim that is frivolous, malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B) and 1915A. This action is subject to sua sponte screening for dismissal under both 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B) an

§ 1915A.

In determining the sufficiency of a pro se complaint, the Court must be mindful to construe it liberally in favor of the plaintiff. See Erickson v. Pardus, 551 U.S. 89, 93-94 (2007) (following Estelle v. Gamble, 429 U.S. 97, 106 (1976) and Haines v. Kerner, 404 U.S. 519, 520-21 (1972)). See also 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). The Court need not, however, credit a pro se plaintiff's "bald assertions" or "legal conclusions." Id.

A complaint is frivolous if it "lacks an arguable basis either in law or in fact." Neitzke v. Williams, 490 U.S. 319, 325 (1989) (interpreting the predecessor of § 1915(e)(2), the former § 1915(d)). The standard for evaluating whether a complaint is "frivolous" is an objective one. Deutsch v. United States, 67 F.3d 1080, 1086-87 (3d Cir. 1995).

A pro se complaint may be dismissed for failure to state a claim only if it appears "'beyond doubt that the plaintiff can prove no set of facts in support of his claim which would entitle him to relief.'" Haines, 404 U.S. at 521 (quoting Conley v. Gibson, 355 U.S. 41, 45-46 (1957)). See also Erickson, 551 U.S.

at 93-94 (In a pro se prisoner civil rights complaint, the Court reviewed whether the complaint complied with the pleading requirements of Rule 8(a)(2)).

However, recently, the Supreme Court revised this standard for summary dismissal of a Complaint that fails to state a claim in Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 129 S.Ct. 1937 (2009). The issue before the Supreme Court was whether Iqbal's civil rights complaint adequately alleged defendants' personal involvement in discriminatory decisions regarding Iqbal's treatment during detention at the Metropolitan Detention Center which, if true, violated his constitutional rights. Id. The Court examined Rule 8(a)(2) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure which provides that a complaint must contain "a short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief."

Fed.R.Civ.P. 8(a)(2).¹ Citing its recent opinion in Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007), for the proposition that "[a] pleading that offers 'labels and conclusions' or 'a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of action will not do,'" Iqbal, 129 S.Ct. at 1949 (quoting Twombly, 550 U.S. at 555), the Supreme Court identified two working principles underlying the failure to state a claim standard:

¹ Rule 8(d)(1) provides that "[e]ach allegation must be simple, concise, and direct. No technical form is required." Fed.R.Civ.P. 8(d).

First, the tenet that a court must accept as true all of the allegations contained in a complaint is inapplicable to legal conclusions. Threadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice Rule 8 ... does not unlock the doors of discovery for a plaintiff armed with nothing more than conclusions. Second, only a complaint that states a plausible claim for relief survives a motion to dismiss. Determining whether a complaint states a plausible claim for relief will ... be a context-specific task that requires the reviewing court to draw on its judicial experience and common sense. But where 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." Fed. Rule Civ. Proc. 8(a)(2).

Iqbal, 129 S.Ct. at 1949-1950 (citations omitted).

The Court further explained that

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. While legal conclusions can provide the framework of a complaint, they must be supported by factual allegations. When there are well-pleaded factual allegations, a court should assume their veracity and then determine whether they plausibly give rise to an entitlement to relief.

Iqbal, 129 S.Ct. at 1950.

Thus, to prevent a summary dismissal, civil complaints must now allege "sufficient factual matter" to show that a claim is facially plausible. This then "allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged." Id. at 1948. The Supreme Court's ruling in Iqbal emphasizes that a plaintiff must demonstrate that the allegations of his complaint are plausible. Id. at 1949-50; see

also Twombly, 505 U.S. at 555, & n.3; Fowler v. UPMC Shadyside, 578 F.3d 203, 210(3d Cir. 2009).

Consequently, the Third Circuit observed that Iqbal provides the "final nail-in-the-coffin for the 'no set of facts' standard" set forth in Conley v. Gibson, 355 U.S. 41, 45-46 (1957),² that applied to federal complaints before Twombly. Fowler, 578 F.3d at 210. The Third Circuit now requires that a district court must conduct the two-part analysis set forth in Iqbal when presented with a motion to dismiss:

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. [Iqbal, 129 S.Ct. at 1949-50]. 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." [Id.] 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.'" Iqbal, [129 S.Ct. at 1949-50]. This "plausibility" determination will be "a context-specific task that requires the reviewing court to draw on its judicial experience and common sense." Id.

Fowler, 578 F.3d at 210-211.

² In Conley, as stated above, a district court was permitted to summarily dismiss a complaint for failure to state a claim only if "it appear[ed] beyond doubt that the plaintiff can prove no set of facts in support of his claim which would entitle him to relief. Id., 355 U.S. at 45-46. Under this "no set of facts" standard, a complaint could effectively survive a motion to dismiss so long as it contained a bare recitation of the claim's legal elements.

This Court is mindful, however, that the sufficiency of this pro se pleading must be construed liberally in favor of Plaintiff, even after Iqbal. See Erickson v. Pardus, 551 U.S. 89 (2007). Moreover, a court should not dismiss a complaint with prejudice for failure to state a claim without granting leave to amend, unless it finds bad faith, undue delay, prejudice or futility. See Grayson v. Mayview State Hosp., 293 F.3d 103, 110-111 (3d Cir. 2002); Shane v. Fauver, 213 F.3d 113, 117 (3d Cir. 2000).

III. SECTION 1983 ACTIONS

Plaintiff brings this action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983. 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).

IV. ANALYSIS

A. Claims Against Public Defender Defendants

Niblack asserts that the public defender attorneys and the Monmouth County Public Defender's Office deprived him of his right to counsel during his re-sentencing and his state PCR proceedings in violation of his Sixth Amendment rights. This claim is not actionable at this time in a § 1983 action. First, these defendants are not subject to liability under § 1983 because they are not state actors. A public defender "does not act under color of state law when performing a lawyer's traditional functions as counsel to a defendant in a criminal proceeding." Polk Co. v. Dodson, 454 U.S. 312, 325 (1981) (a public defender performing a lawyer's traditional functions as counsel to a defendant, such as determining trial strategy and whether to plead guilty, is not acting under color of state law); Thomas v. Howard, 455 F.2d 228 (3d Cir. 1972) (court-appointed pool attorney does not act under color of state law). Even if these defendants were privately retained lawyers, they would not be subject to liability under § 1983. Steward v. Meeker, 459 F.2d 669 (3d Cir. 1972) (privately-retained counsel does not act under color of state law when representing client).

To the extent that Niblack is alleging state action by virtue of a conspiracy between these public defender defendants and the state prosecutors, such claim must be dismissed at this time for failure to state a claim. Niblack fails to satisfy the pleading standard under Iqbal. Indeed, Niblack merely recites a

"threadbare" conspiracy cause of action, supported only by bald conclusory statements, with no factual corroboration that would suffice to state a claim under even the Rule 8 pleading standard. See Iqbal, 129 S.Ct. at 1949-50.

Moreover, even if Niblack had pleaded facts establishing that his attorney is acting under color of state law, any claim concerning a violation of plaintiff's right to effective assistance of counsel must first be raised in plaintiff's ongoing state criminal proceedings. A federal court generally will not intercede to consider issues that the plaintiff has an opportunity to raise before the state court. See Younger v. Harris, 401 U.S. 37 (1971).

To the extent that Niblack's criminal trial or re-sentencing is no longer pending, and he has been sentenced on any state charges, any claim of ineffective assistance of counsel in this regard must first be exhausted via state court remedies, *i.e.*, by direct appeal or other available state court review; and then, if appropriate, by filing a federal habeas application, under 28 U.S.C. § 2254, to assert any violations of federal constitutional or statutory law, namely, his claim of ineffective assistance of counsel. Preiser v. Rodriguez, 411 U.S. 475 (1973). However, to the extent that Niblack alleges ineffective assistance of state PCR counsel, such claim would not be actionable in a federal habeas proceeding pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2254(i).

Therefore, plaintiff's Complaint asserting any liability of the public defender defendants under § 1983, as to an ineffective assistance of counsel claim, must be dismissed for failure to state a claim at this time, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915A(b)(1) and 1915A(b)(1).

B. Prosecutorial Immunity

Next, Niblack appears to assert a claim of prosecutorial misconduct against the state prosecutor defendants for allegedly conspiring with Niblack appointed counsel to deprive Niblack of his right to counsel during his re-sentencing and state PCR proceedings.

"[A] state prosecuting attorney who act[s] within the scope of his duties in initiating and pursuing a criminal prosecution" is not amenable to suit under § 1983. Imbler v. Pachtman, 424 U.S. 409, 410 (1976). Thus, a prosecutor's appearance in court as an advocate in support of an application for a search warrant and the presentation of evidence at such a hearing are protected by absolute immunity. Burns v. Reed, 500 U.S. 478, 492 (1991). Similarly, "acts undertaken by a prosecutor in preparing for the initiation of judicial proceedings or for trial, and which occur in the course of his role as an advocate for the State, are entitled to the protections of absolute immunity." Buckley v. Fitzsimmons, 509 U.S. 259, 273 (1993).

A prosecutor is not entitled to absolute immunity, however, for actions undertaken in some other function. See Kalina v.

Fletcher, 522 U.S. 118 (1997) (prosecutor is protected only by qualified immunity for attesting to the truth of facts contained in certification in support of arrest warrant, as in her provision of such testimony she functioned as a complaining witness rather than a prosecutorial advocate for the state); Burns, 500 U.S. at 492-96 (the provision of legal advice to police during pretrial investigation is protected only by qualified immunity); Buckley, 409 U.S. at 276-78 (prosecutor is not acting as an advocate, and is not entitled to absolute immunity, when holding a press conference or fabricating evidence). See also Yarris v. County of Delaware, 465 F.3d 129 (3d Cir. 2006) (where the Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit presents a detailed and nuanced analysis of when a prosecuting attorney is, and is not, entitled to absolute immunity for allegedly wrongful acts in connection with a prosecution, holding, for example, that a prosecutor is not entitled to absolute immunity for deliberately destroying highly exculpatory evidence, but is entitled to immunity for making the decision to deliberately withhold exculpatory evidence before and during trial, but not after the conclusion of adversarial proceedings).

Here, Niblack's allegations against the state prosecutors appear to fall within the scope of prosecutorial duties in initiating and pursuing a criminal prosecution against plaintiff, namely, during Niblack's resentencing proceedings. Indeed, there are no allegations that appear to fall outside the scope of the

defendants' prosecutorial role, and this Court is hard-pressed to find any allegation of wrongdoing or prosecutorial misconduct of any kind.

Moreover, as discussed above, Niblack's allegations of a conspiracy between the prosecutor defendants and the public defender defendants are nothing more than threadbare, conclusory statements that fail to satisfy the pleading requirements under Rule 8. See Iqbal, 129 S.Ct. at 1949-50. Accordingly, such claim must be dismissed for failure to state a cognizable claim under § 1983 at this time. Therefore, the Complaint against the prosecutor defendants will be dismissed in its entirety for failure to state a claim.

C. Judicial Immunity

Finally, Niblack appears to allege a claim against the Honorable Ira E. Kreizman, J.S.C., that he conspired with the other defendants to deprive plaintiff of his right to counsel during his re-sentencing proceedings.

Generally, a judicial officer in the performance of his or her duties has absolute immunity from suit. Mireless v. Waco, 502 U.S. 9, 12, 112 S.Ct. 286, 116 L. Ed.2d 9 (1991). This immunity extends to judges of courts of limited jurisdiction, such as New Jersey municipal court judges. Figueroa v. Blackburn, 208 F.3d 435, 441-43 (3d Cir. 2000). Further, "[a] judge will not be deprived of immunity because the action he took was in error, was done maliciously, or was in excess of his

authority.” Stump v. Sparkman, 435 U.S. 349, 356-57, 98 S.Ct. 1099, 55 L. Ed.2d 331 (1978). Judicial immunity serves an important function in that it furthers the public interest in judges who are “at liberty to exercise their functions with independence and without fear of consequences.” Pierson v. Ray, 386 U.S. 547, 554, 87 S.Ct. 1213, 18 L. Ed.2d 288 (1967). Judicial immunity is an immunity from suit, not just from ultimate assessment of damages. Mireless, 502 U.S. at 11.

There are two circumstances where a judge’s immunity from civil liability may be overcome. These exceptions to the doctrine of judicial immunity are narrow in scope and are infrequently applied to deny immunity. The first exception is where a judge engages in nonjudicial acts, i.e., actions not taken in the judge’s judicial capacity. Id.; see also Figueroa, 208 F.3d at 440. The second exception involves actions that, though judicial in nature, are taken in the complete absence of all jurisdiction. Mireless, 502 U.S. at 11; Figueroa, 208 F.3d at 440. Neither exception is applicable in the present case.

Plaintiff’s claims against Judge Kreizman involve his presiding over Niblack’s criminal re-sentencing proceedings, which are clearly acts taken in the judge’s judicial capacity. Moreover, Niblack’s threadbare conclusory statements of a conspiracy fails to state a claim and must be dismissed pursuant to Iqbal. Iqbal, 129 S.Ct. at 1949-50. Therefore, the Complaint must be dismissed with prejudice with respect to Judge Kreizman.

IV. CONCLUSION

For the reasons set forth above, Niblack's Complaint asserting claims of conspiracy to deprive him of his right to counsel will be dismissed without prejudice, in its entirety as against the public defender defendants, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii) and 1915A(b)(1), for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted at this time. Further, Niblack's Complaint asserting claims of conspiracy to deprive him of his right to counsel will be dismissed with prejudice, in its entirety as against the prosecutor defendants and Judge Kreizman, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii), (iii) and 1915A(b)(1) and (2), for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted and because the Complaint seeks monetary relief from these defendants who are immune from such relief. An appropriate order follows.

/s/ Anne E. Thompson
ANNE E. THOMPSON
United States District Judge

Dated: 7/6/2010