

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA**

I-KIEM SMITH,	:	Civil No. 3:13-CV-771
	:	
Plaintiff	:	
	:	(Judge Kosik)
v.	:	
	:	(Magistrate Judge Carlson)
MICK WILSON,	:	
	:	
Defendant.	:	

MEMORANDUM ORDER

I. Introduction

This case is a civil rights action brought by a state prisoner, I-Kiem Smith, alleging that the defendant Nick Wilson, a correctional officer, retaliated against Smith by denying him meals and filing false misconduct reports against Smith. This matter now comes before the Court for consideration of a motion to compel discovery filed by Smith. (Docs. 20 and 21) This motion seeks disclosure of various prison policies and investigative reports, and alleges that these discovery requests have been ignored.

The defendants have responded to this motion, denying that they have ignored the plaintiff's discovery requests. Instead, the defendants have shown that they have responded to some requests, while objecting to other requests on the grounds that the

requests either seek sensitive investigative records or seek to compel the defendants to produce items which do not presently exist. (Doc. 25)

For the reasons set forth below, this motion will be denied without prejudice to the renewal of a more narrowly targeted discovery motion, with a greater supporting showing of relevance.

II. Discussion

Several basic guiding principles inform our resolution of the instant discovery dispute. At the outset, Rule 37 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure governs motions for sanctions, and provides that:

(c) Failure to Disclose, to Supplement an Earlier Response, or to Admit.

(1) *Failure to Disclose or Supplement.* If a party fails to provide information or identify a witness as required by Rule 26(a) or (e), the party is not allowed to use that information or witness to supply evidence on a motion, at a hearing, or at a trial, unless the failure was substantially justified or is harmless. In addition to or instead of this sanction, the court, on motion and after giving an opportunity to be heard:

(A) may order payment of the reasonable expenses, including attorney's fees, caused by the failure;

(B) may inform the jury of the party's failure; and

(C) may impose other appropriate sanctions

Fed. R. Civ. P. 37(c).

The scope of what type of discovery may be compelled under Rule 37, and give rise to sanctions, is defined, in turn, by Rule 26(b)(1) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, which provides as follows:

(1) Scope in General. Unless otherwise limited by court order, the scope of discovery is as follows: Parties may obtain discovery regarding any nonprivileged matter that is relevant to any party's claim or defense – including the existence, description, nature, custody, condition, and location of any documents or other tangible things and the identity and location of persons who know of any discoverable matter. For good cause, the court may order discovery of any matter relevant to the subject matter involved in the action. Relevant information need not be admissible at trial if the discovery appears reasonably calculated to lead to the discovery of admissible evidence. All discovery is subject to the limitations imposed by Rule 26(b)(2)(C).

Fed. R. Civ. P. 26(b)(1).

Rulings regarding the proper scope of discovery, and the extent to which discovery may be compelled, are matters consigned to the court's discretion and judgment. Thus, it has long been held that decisions regarding Rule 37 motions are "committed to the sound discretion of the district court." DiGregorio v. First Rediscount Corp., 506 F.2d 781, 788 (3d Cir. 1974). Similarly, issues relating to the scope of discovery permitted under Rule 26 also rest in the sound discretion of the Court. Wisniewski v. Johns-Manville Corp., 812 F.2d 81, 90 (3d Cir. 1987). Thus, a court's decisions regarding the conduct of discovery, and whether to compel disclosure of certain information, will be disturbed only upon a showing of an abuse

of discretion. Marroquin-Manriquez v. I.N.S., 699 F.2d 129, 134 (3d Cir. 1983).

This far-reaching discretion extends to rulings by United States Magistrate Judges on discovery matters. In this regard:

District courts provide magistrate judges with particularly broad discretion in resolving discovery disputes. See Farmers & Merchs. Nat'l Bank v. San Clemente Fin. Group Sec., Inc., 174 F.R.D. 572, 585 (D.N.J.1997). When a magistrate judge's decision involves a discretionary [discovery] matter . . . , “courts in this district have determined that the clearly erroneous standard implicitly becomes an abuse of discretion standard.” Saldi v. Paul Revere Life Ins. Co., 224 F.R.D. 169, 174 (E.D.Pa.2004) (citing Scott Paper Co. v. United States, 943 F.Supp. 501, 502 (E.D.Pa.1996)). Under that standard, a magistrate judge's discovery ruling “is entitled to great deference and is reversible only for abuse of discretion.” Kresefky v. Panasonic Commc'ns and Sys. Co., 169 F.R.D. 54, 64 (D.N.J.1996); see also Hasbrouck v. BankAmerica Hous. Servs., 190 F.R.D. 42, 44-45 (N.D.N.Y.1999) (holding that discovery rulings are reviewed under abuse of discretion standard rather than de novo standard); EEOC v. Mr. Gold, Inc., 223 F.R.D. 100, 102 (E.D.N.Y.2004) (holding that a magistrate judge's resolution of discovery disputes deserves substantial deference and should be reversed only if there is an abuse of discretion).

Halsey v. Pfeiffer, No. 09-1138, 2010 WL 3735702, *1 (D.N.J. Sept. 17, 2010).

This discretion is guided, however, by certain basic principles. Thus, at the outset, it is clear that Rule 26's broad definition of that which can be obtained through discovery reaches only “nonprivileged matter that is relevant to any party’s claim or defense.” Therefore, valid claims of relevance and privilege still cabin and restrict the court’s discretion in ruling on discovery issues. Furthermore, the scope of

discovery permitted by Rule 26 embraces all “relevant information” a concept which is defined in the following terms: “Relevant information need not be admissible at trial if the discovery appears reasonably calculated to lead to the discovery of admissible evidence.”

A party moving under Rule 37 to compel discovery, or for sanctions, bears the initial burden of proving the relevance of the requested information. Morrison v. Philadelphia Housing Auth., 203 F.R.D. 195, 196 (E.D.Pa. 2001). Once that initial burden is met, “the party resisting the discovery has the burden to establish the lack of relevance by demonstrating that the requested discovery (1) does not come within the broad scope of relevance as defined under Fed.R.Civ.P. 26(b)(1), or (2) is of such marginal relevance that the potential harm occasioned by discovery would outweigh the ordinary presumption in favor of broad disclosure.” In re Urethane Antitrust Litigation, 261 F.R.D. 570, 573 (D.Kan. 2009).

Furthermore, in a prison setting, inmate requests for information relating to security procedures can raise security concerns, and implicate a legitimate governmental privilege, a governmental privilege which acknowledges a governmental need to confidentiality of certain data but recognizes that courts must balance the confidentiality of governmental files against the rights of a civil rights litigant by considering:

(1) the extent to which disclosure will thwart governmental processes by discouraging citizens from giving the government information; (2) the impact upon persons who have given information of having their identities disclosed; (3) the degree to which governmental self-evaluation and consequent program improvement will be chilled by disclosure; (4) whether the information sought is factual data or evaluative summary; (5) whether the party seeking the discovery is an actual or potential defendant in any criminal proceeding either pending or reasonably likely to follow from the incident in question; (6) whether the police investigation has been completed; (7) whether any intra-departmental disciplinary proceedings have arisen or may arise from the investigation; (8) whether the plaintiff's suit is non-frivolous and brought in good faith; (9) whether the information sought is available through other discovery or from other sources; and (10) the importance of the information sought to the plaintiffs case.

Frankenhauser v. Rizzo, 59 F.R.D. 339, 344 (E.D. Pa. 1973).

Finally, one other immutable rule defines the court's discretion when ruling on motions to compel discovery. It is clear that the court cannot compel the production of things that do not exist. Nor can the court compel the creation of evidence by parties who attest that they do not possess the materials sought by an adversary in litigation. See, e.g., AFSCME District Council 47 Health and Welfare Fund v. Ortho-McNeil-Janssen Pharmaceuticals, Inc., No. 08-5904, 2010 WL 5186088 (E.D.Pa. Dec. 21, 2010); Knauss v. Shannon, No. 08-1698, 2009 WL 975251 (M.D.Pa. April 9, 2009).

With these legal guideposts in mind, we turn to consideration of Smith's various discovery requests.

First, we will deny these requests to the extent that Smith seeks records which the defendants have already represented do not exist. This response, denying the existence of certain requested materials, is sufficient, and Smith's motion to compel further responses relating to things that do not exist will be denied. See, e.g., AFSCME District Council 47 Health and Welfare Fund v. Ortho-McNeil-Janssen Pharmaceuticals, Inc., No. 08-5904, 2010 WL 5186088 (E.D.Pa. Dec. 21, 2010); Knauss v. Shannon, No. 08-1698, 2009 WL 975251 (M.D.Pa. April 9, 2009).

As for Smith's request for prison investigative documents, we note that Smith has not explained the relevance of these materials and the defendants have objected to the request citing the substantial security concerns, and staff safety issues, which may arise in this setting if these records were to be released. We find this response persuasive, in part, and, therefore, will decline to authorize wholesale disclosure of these documents on the grounds that such disclosure may gravely impair institutional security. See e.g., Banks v. Beard, 3:CV-10-1480, 2013 WL 3773837 (M.D. Pa. July 17, 2013); Mearin v. Folino, CIV.A. 11-571, 2012 WL 4378184 (W.D. Pa. Sept. 24, 2012). However, we enter this order without prejudice to Smith filing a supplemental motion, providing a more detailed proffer regarding the relevance of these materials to the issues in this case, something which the plaintiff has not yet done.

III. Order

Accordingly, for the foregoing reasons the plaintiff's motion to compel (Doc. 20), is DENIED without prejudice.

So ordered this 20th day of December, 2013.

S/Martin C. Carlson

Martin C. Carlson

United States Magistrate Judge