

FILED
United States Court of Appeals
Tenth Circuit

UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE TENTH CIRCUIT

May 9, 2024

Christopher M. Wolpert
Clerk of Court

MARQUISE MILLER,

Plaintiff - Appellant,

v.

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF
HUMAN SERVICES; KATIE SNIDER,
in her official and individual capacities;
PAM LA FERNEY, in her official and
individual capacities; DEANNA
NICHOLS, in her official and individual
capacities; JOAN WEST, in her official
and individual capacities,

Defendants - Appellees.

No. 23-6119
(D.C. No. 5:22-CV-00507-D)
(W.D. Okla.)

ORDER AND JUDGMENT*

Before **MATHESON, BALDOCK, and McHUGH**, Circuit Judges.

* After examining the briefs and appellate record, this panel has determined unanimously to honor the parties' request for a decision on the briefs without oral argument. *See* Fed. R. App. P. 34(f); 10th Cir. R. 34.1(G). The case is therefore submitted without oral argument. This order and judgment is not binding precedent, except under the doctrines of law of the case, res judicata, and collateral estoppel. It may be cited, however, for its persuasive value consistent with Fed. R. App. P. 32.1 and 10th Cir. R. 32.1.

Marquise Miller, proceeding pro se, appeals from the district court’s dismissal of his civil rights suit brought under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. Exercising jurisdiction under 28 U.S.C. § 1291, we affirm.¹

I. BACKGROUND

Mr. Miller owns a childcare center licensed by the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (“OKDHS”). The center contracts with OKDHS to provide subsidized childcare services. Starting in 2019, OKDHS increased its oversight of the center. On certain visits, OKDHS employees cited the center for both serious and non-serious violations. OKDHS initiated a process that could lead to revoking the center’s license.

A. *Original Complaint*

In 2022, Mr. Miller sued OKDHS. He also named four OKDHS inspectors in both their official and individual capacities. His suit complained about the increased oversight of his center and the possibility of losing his license. He alleged that OKDHS did not treat certain other centers similarly. Mr. Miller, who is Black, claimed the defendants violated his equal protection and substantive due process rights under the Fourteenth Amendment and also claimed they violated 42 U.S.C. § 1981. He requested money damages and injunctive relief.

¹ Because Mr. Miller appears pro se, “we liberally construe his filings, but we will not act as his advocate.” *James v. Wadas*, 724 F.3d 1312, 1315 (10th Cir. 2013).

OKDHS and the individual defendants filed motions to dismiss, which the district court granted. The court held Eleventh Amendment immunity barred the claims against OKDHS and the claims for money damages against the individual defendants in their official capacities. It dismissed the remaining claims against the individual defendants, holding the complaint failed to state a claim. The court noted that the complaint failed to specify “*who* is alleged to have done *what* to *whom*,” and that “Plaintiff repeatedly refers to ‘Defendants’ collectively and fails to articulate with specificity the actions taken by the Individual Defendants that allegedly violated his rights.” ROA at 149 (quotations omitted). The court granted Mr. Miller the opportunity to file an amended complaint against the individual defendants.

B. Amended Complaint

Mr. Miller’s amended complaint named the individual defendants only in their individual capacities. It alleged that they had treated his childcare center more harshly than other centers based on “his race, age, and gender,” ROA at 171, and that they were “motivated by racial animus,” ROA at 176-77. The amended complaint reasserted his equal protection, substantive due process, and § 1981 claims.

The defendants again moved to dismiss for failure to state a claim. Before filing a response, Mr. Miller moved to strike the motion to dismiss and moved for entry of default. Based on the postmark on the copy of the motion to dismiss served on him, he contended the motion was untimely because the defendants had served him one day after the filing deadline. The district court denied both of Mr. Miller’s motions, holding that the defendants’ motion to dismiss was not a “pleading” under

Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(f), which authorizes striking materials “from a pleading.”

Mr. Miller then filed his response to the defendants’ motion to dismiss. Among other arguments, he asserted that because he “is a class of one equal protection plaintiff, not a disparate treatment plaintiff,” he did not have to show that the individual defendants supervised the other childcare centers that were similarly situated to his center. ROA at 293.

The district court granted the defendants’ motion to dismiss. It did not address Mr. Miller’s “class of one” assertions and instead said his claims alleged discrimination based on “his age, race, and gender.” ROA at 333. The court, concluding that the amended complaint failed to state a claim, said “Although Plaintiff’s amended complaint includes additional allegations, in general, these allegations amount to ‘labels and conclusions’ and thus, are not entitled to a presumption of truth.” ROA at 335 (quoting *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007)).

Mr. Miller alleged that OKDHS treated two other childcare centers more favorably than his own, but the court said that he “fails, at any point, to discuss the Individual Defendants’ involvement with either facility.” ROA at 336. “As before, Plaintiff again attempts to attribute the collective actions of the Oklahoma Department of Human Services to the Individual Defendants.” ROA at 337. The court thus held that “Plaintiff’s allegations, construed liberally, do not allow the

Court to draw a reasonable inference that the Individual Defendants violated Plaintiff's statutory or constitutional rights." *Id.*

After declining to allow further leave to amend, the district court dismissed the claims against the individual defendants and entered judgment in favor of all the defendants. Mr. Miller timely appealed.

II. DISCUSSION

On appeal, Mr. Miller challenges the district court's (A) denial of his motion to strike the individual defendants' motion to dismiss the amended complaint and of his motion for default judgment, (B) treatment of him as a pro se litigant, (C) dismissal of the amended complaint, and (D) failure to address his "class of one" claim. We affirm on all issues.

A. *Denial of Motion to Strike and Motion for Entry of Default*

Mr. Miller first argues that the district court erred in denying his motions (1) to strike the individual defendants' motion to dismiss the amended complaint and (2) for entry of default. The motion for entry of default rested on the motion to strike, so we need address only the latter.

In his motion to strike, Mr. Miller asserted that the defendants did not timely file their motion to dismiss because they served Mr. Miller one day after the filing deadline. Mr. Miller repeats that argument before this court. But he does not address the district court's reason for denying relief—that Rule 12(f) allows the court to strike materials "from a pleading," and a motion to dismiss is not a pleading. *See, e.g., Bunn v. Perdue*, 966 F.3d 1094, 1099 (10th Cir. 2020) ("Generally,

motions, briefs, and memoranda may not be attacked by a motion to strike.” (ellipsis and quotations omitted)).

Because Mr. Miller does not challenge the district court’s reasoning, we affirm the denial of his motion to strike and the motion for entry of default. *See Nixon v. City & Cnty. of Denver*, 784 F.3d 1364, 1366, 1369 (10th Cir. 2015) (stating that an appellant must “explain what was wrong with the reasoning that the district court relied on in reaching its decision” and affirming the dismissal of a claim where appellant did not challenge the district court’s reasoning).

B. Consideration Due a Pro Se Litigant

Mr. Miller next argues the district court ignored that as a pro se litigant, he was entitled to (1) liberal construction of his complaint, (2) multiple opportunities to amend his complaint and a determination whether further amendments would be futile, and (3) an opportunity to be heard in a civil rights matter.

First, the district court expressly acknowledged its obligation to construe a pro se litigant’s filings liberally. *See, e.g., James*, 724 F.3d at 1315. It said so at the beginning of its dismissal order, *see* ROA at 332 n.2, and later reiterated that it was reading Mr. Miller’s allegations liberally and viewing the allegations in the light most favorable to him, *see* ROA at 337. We see no ground to conclude the district court failed to afford him the benefit of liberal construction. *See Kellogg v. Watts Guerra LLP*, 41 F.4th 1246, 1258 (10th Cir. 2022) (finding “no reason to question the district judge’s word”), *cert. denied*, 143 S. Ct. 1022 (2023).

Second, the district court gave Mr. Miller an opportunity to amend. It denied a second opportunity only after determining Mr. Miller had not corrected the deficiencies in his original complaint and noting he had not requested further leave to amend.

We review a denial of leave to amend for abuse of discretion. *See Quintana v. Santa Fe Cnty. Bd. of Commr's*, 973 F.3d 1022, 1033 (10th Cir. 2020). Although “leave to amend shall be freely given,” especially where a party is proceeding pro se, *Murray v. Archambo*, 132 F.3d 609, 612 (10th Cir. 1998), the court did not abuse its discretion in declining to give him a second shot at amendment, even without expressly determining that amendment would be futile. *See Frank v. U.S. West, Inc.*, 3 F.3d 1357, 1365 (10th Cir. 1993) (listing, among other reasons justifying denial of leave to amend, “failure to cure deficiencies by amendments previously allowed”); *Calderon v. Kan. Dep't of Soc. & Rehab. Servs.*, 181 F.3d 1180, 1186 (10th Cir. 1999) (“[N]ormally a court need not grant leave to amend when a party fails to file a formal motion.”).

Mr. Miller relies on our statement in *Maynard v. Fallin*, 564 F. App'x 943, 946 (10th Cir. 2014) (unpublished), that “we provide reasonable opportunities for pro se litigants to cure defects in their pleadings,” and on our reference in *Frank* to “amendments previously allowed,” 3 F.3d at 1365, stressing the plural use of “opportunities” and “amendments.” Mr. Miller overreads this language. This court has not required district courts to give a pro se plaintiff multiple opportunities to amend.

Third, Mr. Miller says this court has ““recognize[d] the importance of allowing a pro se plaintiff in a civil rights matter to be heard.”” Aplt. Opening Br. at 11 (emphasis omitted) (quoting *Cook v. Watkins*, 312 F. App’x 112, 113 (10th Cir. 2009)). But the district court allowed Mr. Miller to be heard. He responded to the defendants’ motions to dismiss and amended his complaint.

C. Dismissal of the Amended Complaint

Mr. Miller next challenges the dismissal of his amended complaint. We review de novo, asking “whether the factual allegations in the complaint, if accepted as true, allege a plausible claim for relief.” *Gorsuch, Ltd., B.C. v. Wells Fargo Nat’l Bank Ass’n*, 771 F.3d 1230, 1236 (10th Cir. 2014) (citing *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678-79 (2009), and *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 554-57 (2007)). A pleading “demands more than an unadorned, the-defendant-unlawfully-harmed-me accusation.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678. “A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” *Id.*

The district court said that “Plaintiff again attempts to attribute the collective actions of the Oklahoma Department of Human Services to the Individual Defendants.” ROA at 337. Thus, “Plaintiff’s allegations, construed liberally, do not allow the Court to draw a reasonable inference that the Individual Defendants violated Plaintiff’s statutory or constitutional rights.” *Id.* Mr. Miller challenges this conclusion, stating that multiple paragraphs in the amended complaint “put[] each individual Defendant on notice.” Aplt. Opening Br. at 11-12. He states that he

“cannot find one time where he referred to Defendants collectively as Defendants in his amended complaint, as the district court claims.” *Id.* at 12.

The crux of Mr. Miller’s amended complaint is that OKDHS treated his childcare center less favorably than other centers. The individual defendants are liable only for their own actions. *See Schneider v. City of Grand Junction*, 717 F.3d 760, 767-68 (10th Cir. 2013). Thus, Mr. Miller must plead facts showing that the individual defendants named in the amended complaint, not OKDHS as a whole, treated other childcare centers more favorably.

The amended complaint lacks facts showing that any individual defendant dealt with the other childcare centers. Factual support is absent for statements such as “[individual defendant] applies a different set of standards for non-minority owned and/or operated childcare centers than for black owned and operated ones” and “[individual defendant] enforced a much stricter set of standards and policies on Mr. Miller’s childcare facility” than on other facilities. ROA at 156.²

² In his reply brief, Mr. Miller alleges that defendant Pam Laferney is the regional programs supervisor for all childcare centers in the county, including the centers discussed in the amended complaint. He did not plead this fact in the amended complaint. We evaluate the sufficiency of a complaint based on its allegations. *See Jojola v. Chavez*, 55 F.3d 488, 494 (10th Cir. 1995) (“[I]n determining whether to grant a motion to dismiss, the district court, and consequently this court, are limited to assessing the legal sufficiency of the allegations contained within the four corners of the complaint. Therefore, extraneous arguments in an appellate brief may not be relied upon to circumvent pleading defects.” (citation omitted)). Moreover, it is insufficient to allege a defendant was a supervisor without further alleging facts to establish the defendant’s personal participation. *See Schneider*, 717 F.3d at 767-68.

The amended complaint’s descriptions of the violations that allegedly occurred at the other childcare centers refer to “OKDHS” collectively. *See, e.g.*, ROA at 157 (“OKDHS determined”); ROA at 158 (“OKDHS received a complaint”); ROA at 159 (“OKDHS observed”); ROA at 160 (“OKDHS substantiated”); ROA at 166 (“OKDHS does not apply the same standards to all childcare centers”); *id.* (“OKDHS did not come back for a follow up visit”); ROA at 167 (“OKDHS did not require a witness to accompany Licensing staff”). It fails to connect the individual defendants to those alleged violations. *See* ROA at 160 (“La Petite’s daycare center’s Monthly Frequency plan was not changed”); ROA at 161 (“Katie Snider used different policies and standards when evaluating Mr. Miller’s childcare center than what was used evaluating white owned and/or operated daycare centers.”); ROA at 162 (“La Petite daycare center was not put on a plan that could lead to licensure revocation.”); ROA at 167 (“Playtime (+) was not requested to have a conference with OKDHS”).

The district court therefore did not err in concluding that Mr. Miller “again attempts to attribute the collective actions of the Oklahoma Department of Human Services to the Individual Defendants,” ROA at 337, or in holding that the amended complaint failed to state plausible claims against the individual defendants.

D. “*Class of One*”

Finally, Mr. Miller complains that the district court failed to address his “class of one” claim. As he acknowledges, he did not raise “class of one” in his amended complaint but in his response to the individual defendants’ motion to dismiss.

See Aplt. Opening Br. at 13 (stating Mr. Miller raised his “class of one” allegations “[o]n pages 5-11 of Doc. No. 24,” which was his response to the defendants’ motion to dismiss). Rather than pleading he was a class of one, his amended complaint alleged a violation of equal protection based on his “race, age, and gender.” ROA at 171. The district court addressed that allegation. It was not required to address allegations not appearing in the amended complaint.

III. CONCLUSION

We affirm the district court’s judgment.

Entered for the Court

Scott M. Matheson, Jr.
Circuit Judge