

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

San Francisco Division

THOMAS E. SMITH,
Plaintiff,
v.
BRAD HOFFMAN, et al.,
Defendants.

Case No. [14-cv-01741-LB](#)

**ORDER GRANTING MOTION TO
WITHDRAW**

Re: ECF No. 74

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Moore moves to withdraw as counsel for the plaintiff, Thomas Smith, because Mr. Smith “has failed to respond to any and all . . . communication attempts regarding the upcoming deadlines in this case.”¹ Mr. Moore notified Mr. Smith of his intention to withdraw by email three times between September 26, and October 4, 2017, and emailed his motion to Mr. Smith on October 9, 2017.² Mr. Smith did not respond.³ The court held a hearing on November 9, 2017, at 9:30 a.m. Mr. Smith did not appear. The court grants the motion to withdraw and directs Mr. Moore to continue to accept service of all filings and serve them on Mr. Smith, as discussed

¹ Motion to Withdraw – ECF No. 74; Moore Decl. – ECF No. 74 at 3 (¶¶ 3–4). Record citations refer to material in the Electronic Case File (“ECF”); pinpoint citations are to the ECF-generated page numbers at the top of documents.

² See Motion at 10–19; Moore Decl. at 4 (¶ 6).

³ See generally Docket.

1 below. The court also orders Mr. Smith to appear on November 30, 2017, at 9:30 a.m. to show
2 cause why his case should not be dismissed based on his failure to prosecute it.

3 4 **GOVERNING LAW**

5 Under Civil Local Rule 11-5(a), “[c]ounsel may not withdraw from an action until relieved by
6 order of Court after written notice has been given reasonably in advance to the client and to all
7 other parties who have appeared in the case.” Until the client appears *pro se* or obtains other
8 representation, motions to withdraw as counsel may be granted on the condition that current
9 counsel continue to serve on the client all papers from the court and from the opposing parties.
10 Civil L.R. 11-5(b).

11 Withdrawal is governed by the California Rules of Professional Conduct. *See Nehad v.*
12 *Mukasey*, 535 F.3d 962, 970 (9th Cir. 2008) (applying California Rules of Professional Conduct to
13 attorney withdrawal); *see also Dieter v. Regents of Univ. of Cal.*, 963 F. Supp. 908, 910 (E.D. Cal.
14 1997). Under California Rule of Professional Conduct 3-700(C), counsel may withdraw if the
15 client makes it unreasonably difficult for the attorney to carry out his or her duties. Cal. R. Prof.
16 Conduct 3-700(C)(1)(d). Failure to maintain regular communication with one’s counsel constitutes
17 good cause for withdrawal. *Ortiz v. Freitas*, No. 14-CV-00322-JSC, 2015 WL 3826151, at *2
18 (N.D. Cal. June 18, 2015).

19 In compliance with California Rule of Professional Conduct 3-700(A)(2), counsel may not
20 “withdraw from employment until the member has taken reasonable steps to avoid reasonably
21 foreseeable prejudice to the rights of the client.” These steps include: (1) giving due notice to the
22 client; (2) allowing time for employment of other counsel, pursuant to Rule 3-700(D); and
23 (3) complying with applicable laws and rules. Cal. R. P. Conduct 3-700(A)(2); *El Hage v. U.S.*
24 *Sec. Assocs., Inc.*, No. 06-CV-7828-TEH, 2007 WL 4328809, at *1 (N.D. Cal. Dec. 10, 2007).

25 The decision to permit counsel to withdraw is within the sound discretion of the trial court.
26 *U.S. v. Carter*, 560 F.3d 1107, 1113 (9th Cir. 2009). Courts consider several factors when deciding
27 a motion for withdrawal, including: “(1) the reasons counsel seeks to withdraw; (2) the possible
28 prejudice that withdrawal may cause to other litigants; (3) the harm that withdrawal might cause to

1 the administration of justice; and (4) the extent to which withdrawal will delay resolution of the
2 case.” *Deal v. Countrywide Home Loans*, No. 09-CV-01643-SBA, 2010 WL 3702459, at *2 (N.D.
3 Cal. Sept. 15, 2010).

4 ANALYSIS

5 1. Good Cause for Withdrawal

6 Good cause exists for Mr. Moore’s withdrawal. Mr. Smith has not participated in this case
7 since he appealed the judgment in a related case.⁴ But, since the affirmance by the Ninth Circuit
8 and “[s]ubsequent to the dismissal of *Smith v. Harrington* . . . [Mr. Moore and his staff] have
9 repeatedly emailed . . . and telephoned [Mr. Smith] to discuss th[is] case, without success.”⁵
10 Further, Mr. Moore requested a continuance of the May 4, 2017, case-management conference for
11 90 days to allow for Mr. Smith to find new counsel so Mr. Moore could withdraw.⁶ Despite
12 “repeated[] email[s],” calls, and use of “services . . . to skip trace [Mr. Smith] on all known points
13 of contact,” Mr. Moore has not been able to contact Mr. Smith.⁷ The court already granted the 90-
14 day continuance that Mr. Moore requested,⁸ and issued an order to show cause after Mr. Moore
15 did not appear at the case-management conference.⁹ In response to the order to show cause, Mr.
16 Moore stated that he lost communication with Mr. Smith.¹⁰

17 Given Mr. Smith’s lack of communication and participation in the case, it is apparent that Mr.
18 Moore’s continued representation would be unreasonably difficult. Mr. Moore has therefore
19 shown good cause for withdrawal.
20
21
22

23 ⁴ Notice of Appeal – ECF No. 111 in *Smith v. Harrington, et al.*, No. 12-CV-03533-LB.

24 ⁵ Moore Decl. – ECF No. 74 at 3 (¶ 3).

25 ⁶ See Case-Management Statement – ECF No. 60 at 2.

26 ⁷ See Moore Decl. – ECF No. 74 at 3 (¶¶ 3–5).

27 ⁸ See Case-Management Statement – ECF No. 60 at 2

28 ⁹ See Minute Entry – ECF No. 66; Order to Show Cause – ECF No. 67.

¹⁰ Plaintiff’s Response – ECF No. 68 at 2.

1 **2. Timing and Prejudice of Withdrawal**

2 Mr. Moore has taken adequate measures to prevent reasonably foreseeable harm to Mr. Smith
3 and his withdrawal will not prejudice the defendants.

4 First, Mr. Moore has given Mr. Smith enough time and sufficient opportunities to object to the
5 motion. Under Local Rule 11-5(a), Mr. Moore informed Mr. Smith of his intention to withdraw as
6 counsel by voicemail and email.¹¹ Mr. Moore emailed advance written notice of his intention three
7 times: on September 26, September 29, and October 4.¹² He also served Mr. Smith with the
8 motion on October 9, 2017.¹³ Yet Mr. Smith did not respond and did not oppose the motion.

9 Second, Mr. Moore’s withdrawal will not prejudice the defendants. The court set a hearing for
10 November 9, 2017¹⁴ to allow Mr. Smith time to find new counsel (or appear *pro se*), if he decides
11 to participate in the litigation. And, in any event, it is his failure to communicate — not Mr.
12 Moore’s withdrawal — that has led to the Order to Show Cause.

13
14 **3. Further Hearing and Notice to Mr. Smith**

15 Mr. Smith’s counsel served Mr. Smith with the court’s order setting the November 9 hearing.
16 He also said at the hearing that he called Mr. Smith several times after he served him, reached
17 voicemail, recognized Mr. Smith’s voice on the voicemail, left messages for him about the
18 hearing, and never received a call back.

19 Under the circumstances, the court orders Mr. Smith to appear on November 30, 2017, at 9:30
20 a.m. Mr. Smith must appear at the hearing, either through a new lawyer or in person if he has not
21 been able to hire a lawyer yet. If he does not, he risks sanctions, including (1) terminating
22 sanctions in the form of dismissal of his case if he does not appear and participate in his litigation
23 and (2) monetary sanctions. The court sets forth the legal standards to give Mr. Smith an
24 understanding about what the rules require of him.

25 _____
26 ¹¹ Motion – ECF No. 74 at 6–9.

27 ¹² *Id.* at 2–3.

28 ¹³ Moore Decl. – ECF No. 74 at 4 (¶ 6); ECF No. 75 at 2.

¹⁴ Order – ECF No. 73 at 2.

1 may review the record independently to determine if the district court has abused its discretion.”
2 *Id.* (internal citation omitted.) “The sub-parts of the fifth factor are whether the court has
3 considered lesser sanctions, whether it tried them, and whether it warned the recalcitrant party
4 about the possibility of case-dispositive sanctions.” *Connecticut General Life Ins. Co. v. New*
5 *Images of Beverly Hills*, 482 F.3d 1091, 1096 (9th Cir. 2007) (citing *Valley Eng’rs v. Electric*
6 *Eng’g Co.*, 158 F.3d 1051, 1057 (9th Cir. 1998)).¹⁵

7 “A terminating sanction, whether default judgment against a defendant or dismissal of a
8 plaintiff’s action, is very severe.” *Connecticut General Life Ins. Co.*, 482 F.3d at 1096. “Only
9 ‘willfulness, bad faith, and fault’ justify terminating sanctions.” *Id.* (quoting *Jorgensen v.*
10 *Cassiday*, 320 F.3d 906, 912 (9th Cir. 2003)).

11 A party suffers sufficient prejudice to warrant case-dispositive sanctions where the disobedient
12 party’s actions “impair the defendant’s ability to go to trial or threaten to interfere with the rightful
13 decision of the case.” *See in re Phenylpropanolamine (PPA) Products Liability Litigation*, 460
14 F.3d 1217, 1227 (9th Cir. 2006) (quotation omitted).

15 Before ordering a terminating sanction, a court must warn the plaintiff and try other sanctions
16 first. For example, a district court’s failure to warn a party that dismissal is being considered as a
17 sanction weighs heavily against the sanction. *U.S. for Use and Ben. of Wiltec Guam, Inc. v.*
18 *Kahaluu Const. Co., Inc.*, 857 F.2d 600, 605 (9th Cir. 1988). Although “[a]n explicit warning is
19 not always required, at least in a case involving ‘egregious circumstances,’” “[i]n other
20

21 ¹⁵ “This ‘test,’” the Ninth Circuit has explained, “is not mechanical.” *Connecticut General*, 482
22 F.3d at 1096. “It provides the district court with a way to think about what to do, not a set of
23 conditions precedent for sanctions or a script that the district court must follow:

24 Like most elaborate multifactor tests, our test has not been what it appears to be, a
25 mechanical means of determining what discovery sanction is just. The list of factors
26 amounts to a way for a district judge to think about what to do, not a series of conditions
27 precedent before the judge can do anything, and not a script for making what the district
28 judge does appeal-proof.

Valley Eng’rs, 158 F.3d at 1057.

1 circumstances, the failure to warn may place the district court’s order in serious jeopardy.” *Id.*
2 (citing *Malone*, 833 F.2d at 132-33). Indeed, “[f]ailure to warn has frequently been a contributing
3 factor in [Ninth Circuit] decisions to reverse orders of dismissal.” *Id.* (quoting *Malone*, 833 F.2d
4 at 133 (citing cases)).

5
6 **3.2 Monetary sanctions: Federal Rules of Civil Procedure 37(d)(3) and (b)(2)(C)**

7 Rules 37(d)(3) and (b)(2)(C) provide that courts must require the party failing to act, the
8 attorney advising that party, or both to pay to award the reasonable expenses, including attorney's
9 fees, caused by the failure, unless the failure was substantially justified or other circumstances
10 make an award of expenses unjust. “Under Rule 37(b)(2), which has the same language as Rule
11 37(d), the burden of showing substantial justification and special circumstances is on the party
12 being sanctioned.” *Hyde & Drath v. Baker*, 24 F.3d 1162, 1171 (9th Cir. 1994), *as amended* (July
13 25, 1994) (citing *Falstaff Brewing Corp. v. Miller Brewing Co.*, 702 F.2d 770, 784 (9th Cir.1983))

14 Federal courts use the lodestar method to determine a reasonable attorney’s fee award. *Hensley*
15 *v. Eckerhart*, 461 U.S. 424, 433 (1983); *Jordan v. Multnomah Cnty.*, 815 F.2d 1258, 1262 (9th
16 Cir. 1987). The court calculates a “lodestar amount” by multiplying the number of hours counsel
17 reasonably spent on the litigation by a reasonable hourly rate. *See Morales v. City of San Rafael*,
18 96 F.3d 359, 363 (9th Cir. 1996). The burden of proving that claimed rates and number of hours
19 worked are reasonable is on the party seeking the fee award. *Blum v. Stenson*, 465 U.S. 886, 897
20 (1984). The court may adjust the award from the lodestar figure upon consideration of additional
21 factors that may bear upon reasonableness. *Kerr v. Screen Guild Extras, Inc.*, 526 F.2d 67, 70 (9th
22 Cir. 1975).

23
24 **3.3 Order to Appear on November 30, 2017, at 9:30 a.m. and Warning to Mr. Smith**

25 Because Mr. Smith has not been communicating with his attorney or otherwise participating in
26 his lawsuit, the court orders him to appear in person at 450 Golden Gate Avenue, 15th Floor,
27 Courtroom C, San Francisco, California, on November 30, 2017, at 9:30 a.m. If he does not, he
28 risks the court’s imposition of sanctions, including a monetary sanction awardable to the

1 defendant for any costs that it incurs for Mr. Smith's failure to prosecute his case. Ultimately, if
2 Mr. Smith does not participate in his litigation, he risks dismissal of his case for failure to
3 prosecute it, which will result in a judgment being entered in favor of the defendants.

4
5 **CONCLUSION**

6 The court grants Mr. Moore's motion to withdraw. Mr. Moore must continue to serve Mr.
7 Smith with all papers from the defendants and the court until Mr. Smith files a substitution of
8 counsel or appears *pro se*. See Civil L.R. 11-5(b) ("When withdrawal by an attorney from an
9 action is not accompanied by simultaneous appearance of substitute counsel or agreement of the
10 party to appear pro se, leave to withdraw may be subject to the condition that papers may continue
11 to be served on counsel for forwarding purposes, unless and until the client appears by other
12 counsel or pro se."). Mr. Moore must inform Mr. Smith of this condition. See *id.* ("When this
13 condition is imposed, counsel must notify the party of this condition.") Specifically, Mr. Smith
14 must serve a copy of this order on Mr. Smith and file proof of service with the court within one
15 week.

16 The court sets a further hearing on November 30, 2017, at 9:30 a.m. Mr. Smith must appear
17 through his new counsel or, if he has not retained a new lawyer, he must appear in person. His
18 failure to do so may be construed as a failure to prosecute and may ultimately result in sanctions or
19 a dismissal of the case for failure to prosecute it.

20
21 **IT IS SO ORDERED.**

22 Dated: November 9, 2017



23
24 LAUREL BEELER
United States Magistrate Judge