

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF DELAWARE

WARREN SMALL,)	
)	
Plaintiff,)	
)	
v.)	Civ. No. 13-1615-SLR
)	
ROBERTO J. HERRERA, et al.,)	
)	
Defendants.)	

MEMORANDUM

1. **Introduction.** Plaintiff Warren Small (“plaintiff”), an inmate at the Howard R. Young Correctional Institution, Wilmington, Delaware, proceeds pro se and has been granted in forma pauperis status. He filed this complaint pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983 claiming violations of his constitutional rights.¹ (D.I. 3)

2. **Standard of Review.** 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 governmental defendant); 42 U.S.C. § 1997e (prisoner actions brought with respect to prison conditions). The court must accept all factual allegations in a complaint as true and take them in the light most favorable to a pro se plaintiff. *Phillips v. County of Allegheny*, 515 F.3d 224, 229 (3d Cir. 2008); *Erickson v. Pardus*, 551 U.S. 89, 93 (2007). Because plaintiff proceeds pro se, his pleading is liberally construed and his complaint, “however inartfully pleaded, must be

¹When bringing a § 1983 claim, a plaintiff must allege that some person has deprived him of a federal right, and that the person who caused the deprivation acted under color of state law. *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988).

held to less stringent standards than formal pleadings drafted by lawyers.” *Erickson v. Pardus*, 551 U.S. at 94 (citations omitted).

3. An action is frivolous if it “lacks an arguable basis either in law or in fact.” *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 325 (1989). Under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i) and § 1915A(b)(1), a court may dismiss a complaint as frivolous if it is “based on an indisputably meritless legal theory” or a “clearly baseless” or “fantastic or delusional” factual scenario. *Neitzke*, 490 at 327-28; *Wilson v. Rackmill*, 878 F.2d 772, 774 (3d Cir. 1989); see, e.g., *Deutsch v. United States*, 67 F.3d 1080, 1091-92 (3d Cir. 1995) (holding frivolous a suit alleging that prison officials took an inmate’s pen and refused to give it back).

4. The legal standard for dismissing a complaint for failure to state a claim pursuant to § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii) and § 1915A(b)(1) is identical to the legal standard used when ruling on Rule 12(b)(6) motions. *Tourscher v. McCullough*, 184 F.3d 236, 240 (3d Cir. 1999) (applying Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(b)(6) standard to dismissal for failure to state a claim under § 1915(e)(2)(B)). However, before dismissing a complaint or claims for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted pursuant to the screening provisions of 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915 and 1915A, the court must grant plaintiff leave to amend his complaint unless amendment would be inequitable or futile. See *Grayson v. Mayview State Hosp.*, 293 F.3d 103, 114 (3d Cir. 2002).

5. A well-pleaded complaint must contain more than mere labels and conclusions. See *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662 (2009); *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544 (2007). The assumption of truth is inapplicable to legal conclusions or to

“[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action supported by mere conclusory statements.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678. When determining whether dismissal is appropriate, the court must take three steps: “(1) identify[] the elements of the claim, (2) review[] the complaint to strike conclusory allegations, and then (3) look[] at the well-pleaded components of the complaint and evaluat[e] whether all of the elements identified in part one of the inquiry are sufficiently alleged.” *Malleus v. George*, 641 F.3d 560, 563 (3d Cir. 2011). Elements are sufficiently alleged when the facts in the complaint “show” that the plaintiff is entitled to relief. *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679 (quoting Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2)). Deciding whether a claim is plausible will be a “context-specific task that requires the reviewing court to draw on its judicial experience and common sense.” *Id.*

6. Allegations in the Complaint. Plaintiff frames his complaint as “a wrongfully arrested lawsuit.” (D.I. 3, ¶ II.D.) A search warrant was served on plaintiff on September 28, 2012. Plaintiff alleges that defendants intentionally, with reckless disregard for the truth, used false statements to find probable cause to obtain the search warrant and that the execution of the search warrant caused his arrest, incarceration, and conviction.

7. Unlawful Arrest. Plaintiff alleges that he was unlawfully arrested when defendants used false statements to obtain a search warrant. “To state a claim for false arrest under the Fourth Amendment, a plaintiff must establish: (1) that there was an arrest; and (2) that the arrest was made without probable cause.”² *James v. City of*

²“Probable cause to arrest exists when the facts and the circumstances within the arresting officer’s knowledge are sufficient in themselves to warrant a reasonable

Wilkes-Barre, 700 F.3d 675, 680 (3d Cir. 2012); see also *Albright v. Oliver*, 510 U.S. 266, 274-75 (1994). Plaintiff's claim fails. There are no allegations that his arrest was made without probable cause. Instead, plaintiff alleges that the search warrant which resulted in his arrest, was obtained without probable cause.

8. Therefore, the complaint will be dismissed for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii) and § 1915A(b)(1). However, since it is not inconceivable that plaintiff may be able to articulate a claim against defendants (or name alternative defendants), he will be given an opportunity to amend his pleading. See *O'Dell v. United States Gov't*, 256 F. App'x 444 (3d Cir. 2007) (unpublished) (leave to amend is proper where the plaintiff's claims do not appear "patently meritless and beyond all hope of redemption").

9. **Habeas.** To the extent that plaintiff attempts to challenge his conviction and/or sentence, his sole federal remedy for challenging the fact or duration of his confinement is by way of habeas corpus. *Preiser v. Rodriguez*, 411 U.S. 475 (1973). He cannot recover under § 1983 for alleged wrongful incarceration unless he proves that the conviction or sentence has been reversed on direct appeal, expunged by executive order, declared invalid by a state tribunal authorized to make such determination, or called into question by a federal court's issuance of a writ of habeas corpus. See *Heck v. Humphrey*, 512 U.S. 477, 487 (1994). A claim for damages

person to believe that an offense has been or is being committed by the person to be arrested." *Merkle v. Upper Dublin Sch. Dist.*, 211 F.3d 782, 788 (3d Cir. 2000) (quoting *Orsatti v. New Jersey State Police*, 71 F.3d 480, 482 (3d Cir. 1995)). The arresting officer must only reasonably believe at the time of the arrest that an offense is being committed, a significantly lower burden than proving guilt at trial. See *Wright v. City of Phila.*, 409 F.3d 595, 602 (3d Cir. 2005).

bearing that relationship to a conviction or sentence that has not been invalidated is not cognizable under § 1983. *Wallace v. Kato*, 549 U.S. 384, 392 (2007) (citing *Heck*, 512 U.S. at 486-87). The cause of action accrues at the time the imprisonment is invalidated. *Gibson v. Superintendent of N.J. Dep't of Law and Public Safety Div.*, 411 F.3d 427, 435 (3d Cir. 2005); see also *Wallace*, 549 U.S. at 388 (cause of action accrues when plaintiff is able to "file suit and obtain relief.").

10. Plaintiff has not alleged or proven that his conviction or sentence was reversed or invalidated as provided by *Heck*. Moreover, his claims against defendants present the type of claims addressed in *Heck*; that is, a finding that plaintiff's conviction was procured by unconstitutional means would necessarily imply the invalidity of his conviction. Plaintiff appears to allege that, but for defendants' actions, he would not have been found guilty.

11. To the extent plaintiff seeks damages for his current incarceration, his claim rests on an "inarguable legal conclusion" and is, therefore, frivolous. Accordingly, the court will dismiss the claim as frivolous pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B) and § 1915A(b)(1).

12. **Conclusion.** For the above reasons, the complaint will be dismissed as frivolous and for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i) and (ii) and § 1915A(b)(1). Plaintiff will be given leave to file an amended complaint. A separate order shall issue.

Date: March 25, 2014


UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE