

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN
SOUTHERN DIVISION

SANDY HOLT, JR.,

Plaintiff,

Case No. 1:15-cv-1348

v.

Honorable Paul L. Maloney

BONITA J. HOFFNER et al.,

Defendants.

OPINION

This is a civil rights action brought by a state prisoner pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983. The Court has granted Plaintiff leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*. Under the Prison Litigation Reform Act, PUB. L. NO. 104-134, 110 STAT. 1321 (1996), the Court is required to dismiss any prisoner action brought under federal law if the complaint is frivolous, malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief can be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2), 1915A; 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c). The Court must read Plaintiff's *pro se* complaint indulgently, *see Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972), and accept Plaintiff's allegations as true, unless they are clearly irrational or wholly incredible. *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25, 33 (1992). Applying these standards, Plaintiff's action will be dismissed for failure to state a claim.

Factual Allegations

Plaintiff Sandy Holt, Jr. presently is incarcerated with the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) at the Lakeland Correctional Facility (LCF). He sues LCF Warden Bonita J. Hoffner, unknown LCF staff member (Unknown Party), Michigan Supreme Court Clerk Larry S. Royster, and Michigan Supreme Court Deputy Clerk Inger Z. Meyer.

Plaintiff alleges that he filed a state-court habeas proceeding in the Branch County Circuit Court on November 21, 2014. The warden filed a response on December 10, 2014. On December 22, 2014, Plaintiff sent a document inquiring whether the court was accepting the “premature” response, which he contended must be filed only after the warden had indicated an intent to respond. Plaintiff also informed the court that he intended to file a reply. Plaintiff filed his reply on January 6, 2015, though they were not docketed until January 8, 2015. On January 7, 2015, the court denied the complaint on the ground that the issue raised should have been presented on direct appeal rather than in a habeas corpus complaint. (*See Attach. to Compl., ECF No. 1-1, PageID.62.*)

Plaintiff, however, asserts that he was denied due process by Defendant Unknown Party, who prevented his December 22, 2014 legal mail from reaching the court. That mail was returned to Plaintiff by the mailroom supervisor, J. Hutchins, on March 30, 2015. Plaintiff complains that he attempted to identify the person who was responsible for interfering with his mail, and he faults Defendant Warden Hoffner for failing to supervise her employees and failing to identify the responsible party.

On October 6, 2015, Plaintiff mailed an original complaint for habeas relief to the Michigan Supreme Court. That complaint was rejected by Defendant Meyer and returned to Plaintiff, because under the Michigan Court Rules, Plaintiff could not file an original habeas complaint in the Michigan Supreme

Court. (*Id.* at PageID.92, 94.) Defendant Royster responded to a subsequent letter from Plaintiff on December 7, 2015, explaining the same requirements of the rules. (*Id.* at 98.) Plaintiff contends that Defendants Meyer Royster violated his rights to access the courts.

Plaintiff seeks declaratory relief, as well as compensatory and punitive damages.

Discussion

I. Immunity

Generally, a judge is absolutely immune from a suit for monetary damages. *Mireles v. Waco*, 502 U.S. 9, 9-10 (1991) (“[I]t is a general principle of the highest importance to the proper administration of justice that a judicial officer, in exercising the authority vested in him, shall be free to act upon his own convictions, without apprehension of personal consequences to himself.”) (internal quotations omitted); *Barrett v. Harrington*, 130 F.3d 246, 254 (6th Cir. 1997); *Barnes v. Winchell*, 105 F.3d 1111, 1115 (6th Cir. 1997). Absolute judicial immunity may be overcome in only two instances. First, a judge is not immune from liability for non-judicial actions, i.e., actions not taken in the judge’s judicial capacity. *Mireles*, 502 U.S. at 11; see *Forrester v. White*, 484 U.S. 219, 229 (1988) (noting that immunity is grounded in “the nature of the function performed, not the identity of the actor who performed it”). Second, a judge is not immune for actions, though judicial in nature, taken in complete absence of all jurisdiction. *Id.* at 12.

Absolute judicial immunity is extended to non-judicial officers who perform “quasi-judicial” duties. “Quasi-judicial immunity extends to those persons performing tasks so integral or intertwined with the judicial process that these persons are considered an arm of the judicial officer who is immune.” *Bush v. Rauch*, 38 F.3d 842 (6th Cir. 1994) (probate court administrator entitled to quasi-judicial immunity for

his role in carrying out the orders of the court) (citing *Scruggs v. Moellering*, 870 F.2d 376 (7th Cir. 1989)); *see also Johnson v. Turner*, 125 F.3d 324, 333 (6th Cir. 1997) (one who acts as a judge's designee in carrying out a function for which the judge is immune is also protected from suit seeking monetary damages); *Foster v. Walsh*, 864 F.2d 416, 417-18 (6th Cir. 1988) (clerk of court was entitled to quasi-judicial immunity for issuing a warrant as directed by the court); *accord Carlton v. Baird*, No. 03-1294, 2003 WL 21920023, at *1 (6th Cir. Aug. 8, 2003) (state court clerk's office employees were entitled to quasi-judicial immunity from state prison inmate's § 1983 claim); *Lyle v. Jackson*, No. 02-1323, 2002 WL 31085181, at *1 (6th Cir. Sept. 17, 2002) (quasi-judicial immunity applied to claims against state court clerks who allegedly failed to provide prisoner with requested copies of previous filings and transcripts); *Bradley v. United States*, 84 F. App'x 492 (6th Cir. 2003) (federal court clerk). *Cf. Antoine v. Byers & Anderson, Inc.*, 508 U.S. 429, 437 & n.11 (1993) (court reporter not entitled to absolute immunity for preparing transcripts because that function is ministerial; it does not exercise the kind of judgment protected by judicial immunity).

Here, according to the attachments to the complaint, Defendant Meyer returned Plaintiff's complaint because, under the Michigan Court Rules, an original complaint for habeas corpus is not properly filed in the Michigan Supreme Court. Defendant Meyer was clearly acting on behalf of the court when she returned Plaintiff's complaint. Defendant Royster also was acting on behalf of the court when he responded to Plaintiff's subsequent complaints about Defendant Meyer. Because Defendants Meyer and Royster are entitled to quasi-judicial immunity, Plaintiff may not maintain an action against them for monetary damages.

II. Failure to state a claim

A complaint may be dismissed for failure to state a claim if it fails “to give the defendant fair notice of what the . . . claim is and the grounds upon which it rests.” *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007) (quoting *Conley v. Gibson*, 355 U.S. 41, 47 (1957)). While a complaint need not contain detailed factual allegations, a plaintiff’s allegations must include more than labels and conclusions. *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555; *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (“Threadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice.”). The court must determine whether the complaint contains “enough facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.” *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 570. “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.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679. Although the plausibility standard is not equivalent to a “probability requirement,’ . . . it asks for more than a sheer possibility that a defendant has acted unlawfully.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678 (quoting *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 556). “[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*, 556 U.S. at 679 (quoting FED. R. CIV. P. 8(a)(2)); *see also Hill v. Lappin*, 630 F.3d 468, 470-71 (6th Cir. 2010) (holding that the *Twombly/Iqbal* plausibility standard applies to dismissals of prisoner cases on initial review under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915A(b)(1) and 1915(e)(2)(B)(i)).

To state a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege the violation of a right secured by the federal Constitution or laws and must show that the deprivation was committed by a person acting under color of state law. *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988); *Dominguez v. Corr. Med. Servs.*, 555 F.3d 543, 549 (6th Cir. 2009). Because § 1983 is a method for vindicating federal rights, not

a source of substantive rights itself, the first step in an action under § 1983 is to identify the specific constitutional right allegedly infringed. *Albright v. Oliver*, 510 U.S. 266, 271 (1994). Plaintiff fails to make specific factual allegations against Defendant Hoffner, other than his claim that Hoffner failed to adequately supervise her employees and failed to discover who had misplaced Plaintiff's legal mail. Government officials may not be held liable for the unconstitutional conduct of their subordinates under a theory of respondeat superior or vicarious liability. *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 676; *Monell v. New York City Dep't of Soc. Servs.*, 436 U.S. 658, 691(1978); *Everson v. Leis*, 556 F.3d 484, 495 (6th Cir. 2009). A claimed constitutional violation must be based upon active unconstitutional behavior. *Grinter v. Knight*, 532 F.3d 567, 575-76 (6th Cir. 2008); *Greene v. Barber*, 310 F.3d 889, 899 (6th Cir. 2002). The acts of one's subordinates are not enough, nor can supervisory liability be based upon the mere failure to act. *Grinter*, 532 F.3d at 576; *Greene*, 310 F.3d at 899; *Summers v. Leis*, 368 F.3d 881, 888 (6th Cir. 2004). Moreover, § 1983 liability may not be imposed simply because a supervisor denied an administrative grievance or failed to act based upon information contained in a grievance. *See Shehee v. Luttrell*, 199 F.3d 295, 300 (6th Cir. 1999). "[A] plaintiff must plead that each Government-official defendant, through the official's own individual actions, has violated the Constitution." *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 676. Plaintiff has failed to allege that Defendant Hoffner engaged in any active unconstitutional behavior. Accordingly, he fails to state a claim against them.

Plaintiff also fails to state a claim against Defendant Unknown Party. It is well established that prisoners have a constitutional right of access to the courts. *Bounds v. Smith*, 430 U.S. 817, 821 (1977). The principal issue in *Bounds* was whether the states must protect the right of access to the courts by providing law libraries or alternative sources of legal information for prisoners. *Id.* at 817. The Court

further noted that in addition to law libraries or alternative sources of legal knowledge, the states must provide indigent inmates with “paper and pen to draft legal documents, notarial services to authenticate them, and with stamps to mail them.” *Id.* at 824-25. The right of access to the courts also prohibits prison officials from erecting barriers that may impede the inmate’s access to the courts. *See Knop v. Johnson*, 977 F.2d 996, 1009 (6th Cir. 1992).

An indigent prisoner’s constitutional right to legal resources and materials is not, however, without limit. In order to state a viable claim for interference with his access to the courts, a plaintiff must show “actual injury.” *Lewis v. Casey*, 518 U.S. 343, 349 (1996); *see also Talley-Bey v. Knebl*, 168 F.3d 884, 886 (6th Cir. 1999); *Knop*, 977 F.2d at 1000. In other words, a plaintiff must plead and demonstrate that the shortcomings in the prison legal assistance program or lack of legal materials have hindered, or are presently hindering, his efforts to pursue a nonfrivolous legal claim. *Lewis*, 518 U.S. at 351-53; *see also Pilgrim v. Littlefield*, 92 F.3d 413, 416 (6th Cir. 1996). The Supreme Court has strictly limited the types of cases for which there may be an actual injury:

Bounds does not guarantee inmates the wherewithal to transform themselves into litigating engines capable of filing everything from shareholder derivative actions to slip-and-fall claims. The tools it requires to be provided are those that the inmates need in order to attack their sentences, directly or collaterally, and in order to challenge the conditions of their confinement. Impairment of any other litigating capacity is simply one of the incidental (and perfectly constitutional) consequences of conviction and incarceration.

Lewis, 518 U.S. at 355. “Thus, a prisoner’s right to access the courts extends to direct appeals, habeas corpus applications, and civil rights claims only.” *Thaddeus-X v. Blatter*, 175 F.3d 378, 391 (6th Cir. 1999) (en banc). Moreover, the underlying action must have asserted a non-frivolous claim. *Lewis*, 518 U.S. at 353; *accord Hadix v. Johnson*, 182 F.3d 400, 405 (6th Cir. 1999) (*Lewis* changed actual injury

to include requirement that action be non-frivolous). In addition, the Supreme Court squarely has held that “the underlying cause of action . . . is an element that must be described in the complaint, just as much as allegations must describe the official acts frustrating the litigation.” *Christopher v. Harbury*, 536 U.S. 403, 415 (2002) (citing *Lewis*, 518 U.S. at 353 & n.3). “Like any other element of an access claim, the underlying cause of action and its lost remedy must be addressed by allegations in the complaint sufficient to give fair notice to a defendant.” *Id.* at 416.

Plaintiff alleges that he brought a state habeas complaint and that the Unknown Party prevented his letter of December 22, 2014 from being mailed in a timely fashion. He complains that the delay in mailing resulted in the dismissal of his habeas complaint.

Plaintiff’s allegations fail to show actual injury. While the nature of suit that Plaintiff pursued fell within the ambit of his right of access to the courts, the content of his habeas complaint was utterly frivolous. Plaintiff argued that he was not brought to trial within 180 days, as required by MICH. COMP. LAWS § 780.131, and that his 2003 conviction for armed robbery therefore was entered without jurisdiction. The trial court held Plaintiff’s claim could have been raised on direct appeal and did not amount to a jurisdictional defect correctable on habeas review. Plaintiff has alleged no fact suggesting that the trial court’s decision would have been affected in any way by Plaintiff’s letter complaining that the defendant’s response was premature and that Plaintiff intended to file a reply. His arguments were nonsensical in the first instance and would not have become more persuasive with additional argument.

Conclusion

Having conducted the review required by the Prison Litigation Reform Act, the Court determines that Plaintiff's action will be dismissed on grounds of immunity and failure to state a claim, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A(b), and 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c).

The Court must next decide whether an appeal of this action would be in good faith within the meaning of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3). *See McGore v. Wrigglesworth*, 114 F.3d 601, 611 (6th Cir. 1997). For the same reasons that the Court dismisses the action, the Court discerns no good-faith basis for an appeal. Should Plaintiff appeal this decision, the Court will assess the \$505.00 appellate filing fee pursuant to § 1915(b)(1), *see McGore*, 114 F.3d at 610-11, unless Plaintiff is barred from proceeding *in forma pauperis*, e.g., by the "three-strikes" rule of § 1915(g). If he is barred, he will be required to pay the \$505.00 appellate filing fee in one lump sum.

This is a dismissal as described by 28 U.S.C. § 1915(g).

A Judgment consistent with this Opinion will be entered.

Dated: February 3, 2016

/s/ Paul L. Maloney

Paul L. Maloney
United States District Judge