

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

DERRICK LEE SMITH,

Petitioner,

Case No. 1:17-cv-314

v.

Honorable Gordon J. Quist

J. DIETZ et al.,

Respondents.

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OPINION

This is a habeas corpus action brought by a state prisoner pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2254. Promptly after the filing of a petition for habeas corpus, the Court must undertake a preliminary review of the petition to determine whether “it plainly appears from the face of the petition and any exhibits annexed to it that the petitioner is not entitled to relief in the district court.” Rule 4, RULES GOVERNING § 2254 CASES; *see* 28 U.S.C. § 2243. If so, the petition must be summarily dismissed. Rule 4; *see Allen v. Perini*, 424 F.2d 134, 141 (6th Cir. 1970) (district court has the duty to “screen out” petitions that lack merit on their face). A dismissal under Rule 4 includes those petitions which raise legally frivolous claims, as well as those containing factual allegations that are palpably incredible or false. *Carson v. Burke*, 178 F.3d 434, 436-37 (6th Cir. 1999). After undertaking the review required by Rule 4, the Court concludes that the petition must be dismissed because it fails to raise a meritorious habeas claim.

Factual Allegations

Petitioner Derrick Lee Smith presently is incarcerated with the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) at the Earnest C. Brooks Correctional Facility (LRF). He sues LRF mailroom staff members J. Dietz, A. Hall, A. Karel, and S. Payton.

Although Petitioner expressly labels his action as one seeking relief under 28 U.S.C. § 2254, the allegations of his complaint concern the conditions of his confinement. Petitioner, purportedly on behalf of all prisoners similarly situated, contends that Defendants have violated his First Amendment rights by seizing and withholding at least four issues of the Prison Legal News and Lawyers Weekly on multiple dates, thereby violating his right to freedom of the press. He also alleges that the actions were taken in an effort to prevent Muslim prisoners from learning that other courts had held prison officials responsible for providing inadequate Ramadan meals and other constitutional violations.

For relief, Petitioner seeks a restraining order and the return of all of his issues of the two publications.

Discussion

The instant petition is subject to summary dismissal because Petitioner is challenging the conditions of his confinement. Where a prisoner is challenging the very fact or duration of his physical imprisonment and the relief that he seeks is a determination that he is entitled to immediate release or a speedier release from that imprisonment, his sole federal remedy is a petition for writ of habeas corpus. *Preiser v. Rodriguez*, 411 U.S. 475, 500 (1973). However, habeas corpus is not available to prisoners who are complaining only of the conditions of their confinement or mistreatment during their legal incarceration. *See Martin v. Overton*, 391 F.3d 710, 714 (6th Cir.

2004); *Lutz v. Hemingway*, 476 F. Supp. 2d 715, 718 (E.D. Mich. 2007). Complaints like those made by Petitioner, which involve conditions of confinement, “do not relate to the legality of the petitioner’s confinement, nor do they relate to the legal sufficiency of the criminal court proceedings which resulted in the incarceration of the petitioner.” *Id.* (quoting *Maddux v. Rose*, 483 F. Supp. 661, 672 (E.D. Tenn. 1980)). An inmate like Petitioner may, however, bring claims that challenge the conditions of confinement under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. *Id.*; see also *Austin v. Bell*, 927 F. Supp. 1058, 1066 (M.D. Tenn. 1996). Because Petitioner challenges only the conditions of his confinement, his claims ‘fall outside of the cognizable core of habeas corpus relief.’ See *Hodges v. Bell*, 170 F. Appx 389, 393 (6th Cir. 2006).

Although pro se litigants are treated to less stringent pleading formalities, courts still require such litigants to meet basic pleading standards. *Wells v. Brown*, 891 F.2d 591, 594 (6th Cir. 1989). “Arguably, hanging the legal hat on the correct peg is such a standard, and ‘[l]iberal construction does not require a court to conjure allegations on a litigant’s behalf.’” *Martin*, 391 F.3d at 714 (quoting *Erwin v. Edwards*, 22 F. App’x 579, 580 (6th Cir. 2001) (dismissing a § 1983 suit brought as a § 2254 petition)). The Sixth Circuit has held that where, as here, the claims about the conditions of confinement are not cognizable in an action under § 2254, the district court must dismiss the habeas action without prejudice to allow the petitioner to raise his potential civil rights claims properly in a § 1983 action. *Martin*, 391 F.3d at 714.¹

¹The Court notes that Petitioner has filed dozens of “habeas” actions in this Court and the Eastern District of Michigan. This is not the first occasion on which this Court or the Eastern District of Michigan has dismissed such an action because a habeas proceeding is not the proper vehicle for raising claims about the conditions of confinement. See, e.g., *Smith v. Heyns et al.*, No. 1:13-cv-1305 (W.D. Mich. December 19, 2013); *Smith v. Harry*, No. 1:17-cv-10285 (E.D. Mich. Feb. 21, 2017).

Conclusion

For the foregoing reasons, the Court will summarily dismiss Petitioner's application pursuant to Rule 4 because it fails to raise a meritorious habeas claim.

Certificate of Appealability

Under 28 U.S.C. § 2253(c)(2), the Court must determine whether a certificate of appealability should be granted. A certificate should issue if Petitioner has demonstrated a "substantial showing of a denial of a constitutional right." 28 U.S.C. § 2253(c)(2). This Court's dismissal of Petitioner's action under Rule 4 of the Rules Governing § 2254 Cases is a determination that the habeas action, on its face, lacks sufficient merit to warrant service. It would be highly unlikely for this Court to grant a certificate, thus indicating to the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals that an issue merits review, when the Court has already determined that the action is so lacking in merit that service is not warranted. *See Love v. Butler*, 952 F.2d 10 (1st Cir. 1991) (it is "somewhat anomalous" for the court to summarily dismiss under Rule 4 and grant a certificate); *Hendricks v. Vasquez*, 908 F.2d 490 (9th Cir. 1990) (requiring reversal where court summarily dismissed under Rule 4 but granted certificate); *Dory v. Comm'r of Corr. of New York*, 865 F.2d 44, 46 (2d Cir. 1989) (it was "intrinsically contradictory" to grant a certificate when habeas action does not warrant service under Rule 4); *Williams v. Kullman*, 722 F.2d 1048, 1050 n.1 (2d Cir. 1983) (issuing certificate would be inconsistent with a summary dismissal).

The Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals has disapproved issuance of blanket denials of a certificate of appealability. *Murphy v. Ohio*, 263 F.3d 466 (6th Cir. 2001). Rather, the district court must "engage in a reasoned assessment of each claim" to determine whether a certificate is warranted. *Id.* at 467. Each issue must be considered under the standards set forth by the Supreme

Court in *Slack v. McDaniel*, 529 U.S. 473 (2000). *Murphy*, 263 F.3d at 467. Consequently, this Court has examined each of Petitioner's claims under the *Slack* standard. Under *Slack*, 529 U.S. at 484, to warrant a grant of the certificate, "[t]he petitioner must demonstrate that reasonable jurists would find the district court's assessment of the constitutional claims debatable or wrong." *Id.* "A petitioner satisfies this standard by demonstrating that . . . jurists could conclude the issues presented are adequate to deserve encouragement to proceed further." *Miller-El v. Cockrell*, 537 U.S. 322, 327 (2003). In applying this standard, the Court may not conduct a full merits review, but must limit its examination to a threshold inquiry into the underlying merit of Petitioner's claims. *Id.*

The Court finds that reasonable jurists could not conclude that this Court's dismissal of Petitioner's claims was debatable or wrong. Therefore, the Court will deny Petitioner a certificate of appealability.

A Judgment and Order consistent with this Opinion will be entered.

Date: April 18, 2017

/s/ Gordon J. Quist
GORDON J. QUIST
United States District Judge