

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN
SOUTHERN DIVISION

JEREMEY ZIMMERMAN,

Plaintiff,

Case No. 1:23-cv-303

v.

Honorable Sally J. Berens

M. PIGGOTT,

Defendant.

OPINION

This is a civil rights action brought by a state prisoner under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. Plaintiff has been granted leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*. (ECF No. 4.) Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 636(c) and Rule 73 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, Plaintiff consented to proceed in all matters in this action under the jurisdiction of a United States magistrate judge. (ECF No. 1, PageID.4.)

This case is presently before the Court for preliminary review under the Prison Litigation Reform Act, Pub. L. No. 104-134, 110 Stat. 1321 (1996) (PLRA), pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A(b), and 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c). The Court is required to conduct this initial review prior to the service of the complaint. *See In re Prison Litig. Reform Act*, 105 F.3d 1131, 1131, 1134 (6th Cir. 1997); *McGore v. Wrigglesworth*, 114 F.3d 601, 604–05 (6th Cir. 1997).

Service of the complaint on the named defendants is of particular significance in defining a putative defendant’s relationship to the proceedings. “An individual or entity named as a defendant is not obliged to engage in litigation unless notified of the action, and brought under a court’s authority, by formal process.” *Murphy Bros. v. Michetti Pipe Stringing, Inc.*, 526 U.S. 344, 347 (1999). “Service of process, under longstanding tradition in our system of justice, is

fundamental to any procedural imposition on a named defendant.” *Id.* at 350. “[O]ne becomes a party officially, and is required to take action in that capacity, only upon service of a summons or other authority-asserting measure stating the time within which the party served must appear and defend.” *Id.* (citations omitted). That is, “[u]nless a named defendant agrees to waive service, the summons continues to function as the *sine qua non* directing an individual or entity to participate in a civil action or forgo procedural or substantive rights.” *Id.* at 351. Therefore, the PLRA, by requiring courts to review and even resolve a plaintiff’s claims before service, creates a circumstance where there may only be one party to the proceeding—the plaintiff—at the district court level and on appeal. *See, e.g., Conway v. Fayette Cnty. Gov’t*, 212 F. App’x 418 (6th Cir. 2007) (“Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915A, the district court screened the complaint and dismissed it without prejudice before service was made upon any of the defendants . . . [such that] . . . only [the plaintiff] [wa]s a party to this appeal.”).

Here, Plaintiff has consented to a United States magistrate judge conducting all proceedings in this case under 28 U.S.C. § 636(c). That statute provides that “[u]pon the consent of the parties, a full-time United States magistrate judge . . . may conduct any or all proceedings . . . and order the entry of judgment in the case” 28 U.S.C. § 636(c). Because the named Defendants have not yet been served, the undersigned concludes that they are not presently parties whose consent is required to permit the undersigned to conduct a preliminary review under the PLRA, in the same way they are not parties who will be served with or given notice of this opinion. *See Neals v. Norwood*, 59 F.3d 530, 532 (5th Cir. 1995) (“The record does not contain a

consent from the defendants[; h]owever, because they had not been served, they were not parties to th[e] action at the time the magistrate entered judgment.”¹

Under the PLRA, 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, the Court will dismiss Plaintiff’s complaint for failure to state a claim.

Discussion

I. Factual Allegations

Plaintiff is presently incarcerated with the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) at the Ionia Correctional Facility (ICF) in Ionia, Ionia County, Michigan. The events about which he complains, however, occurred at the Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility (IBC) in Ionia, Ionia County, Michigan. Plaintiff sues Corrections Officer M. Piggott.²

¹ *But see Coleman v. Lab. & Indus. Rev. Comm’n of Wis.*, 860 F.3d 461, 471 (7th Cir. 2017) (concluding that, when determining which parties are required to consent to proceed before a United States magistrate judge under 28 U.S.C. § 636(c), “context matters” and the context the United States Supreme Court considered in *Murphy Bros.* was nothing like the context of a screening dismissal pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A(b), and 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c)); *Williams v. King*, 875 F.3d 500, 503–04 (9th Cir. 2017) (relying on Black’s Law Dictionary for the definition of “parties” and not addressing *Murphy Bros.*); *Burton v. Schamp*, 25 F.4th 198, 207 n.26 (3d Cir. 2022) (premising its discussion of “the term ‘parties’ solely in relation to its meaning in Section 636(c)(1), and . . . not tak[ing] an opinion on the meaning of ‘parties’ in other contexts”).

² Plaintiff appears to list the MDOC in the case caption of his “Proof of Service,” which is attached to his complaint. (ECF No. 1, PageID.5.) Plaintiff, however, did not name the MDOC as a Defendant anywhere else. Even assuming that Plaintiff intended to name the MDOC as a Defendant, he cannot maintain his claims against that entity. Regardless of the form of relief requested, the states and their departments are immune under the Eleventh Amendment from suit in the federal courts, unless the state has waived immunity or Congress has expressly abrogated

Plaintiff alleges that on August 10, 2022, Defendant Piggott told Plaintiff that if he did not do what he was told, Defendant Piggott would make him “suck [Defendant Piggott’s] fat c*** until [he] choke[d] like the f** [he is].” (ECF No. 1, PageID.2.) Plaintiff contends that this occurred when Defendant Piggott was walking him back from the showers. (*Id.*, PageID.3.) Plaintiff submitted a complaint pursuant to the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA), but alleges that it was ignored and not answered. (*Id.*)

On November 17, 2022, Plaintiff gave counselor Houghton (not a party) a kite regarding Defendant Piggott. (*Id.*) Plaintiff’s “request for a [PREA] complaint was again ignored.” (*Id.*) The next day, Defendant Piggott came to Plaintiff’s cell and said, “I always wanted my d*** sucked by a cleft lip retard with no teeth, and you look like you’d love a fat c*** in [your] mouth.” (*Id.*) “Plaintiff felt humiliated and degraded.” (*Id.*) He submitted a kite asking to press sexual harassment charges against Defendant Piggott. (*Id.*)

Based on the foregoing, Plaintiff asserts violations of his Eighth Amendment rights, the PREA itself, and various MDOC policies. (*Id.*) He seeks compensatory and punitive damages. (*Id.*, PageID.4.)

Eleventh Amendment immunity by statute. *See Pennhurst State Sch. & Hosp. v. Halderman*, 465 U.S. 89, 98–101 (1984); *Alabama v. Pugh*, 438 U.S. 781, 782 (1978); *O’Hara v. Wigginton*, 24 F.3d 823, 826 (6th Cir. 1994). Congress has not expressly abrogated Eleventh Amendment immunity by statute, *Quern v. Jordan*, 440 U.S. 332, 341 (1979), and the State of Michigan has not consented to civil rights suits in federal court. *Abick v. Michigan*, 803 F.2d 874, 877 (6th Cir. 1986). In numerous opinions, the Sixth Circuit has specifically held that the MDOC is absolutely immune from a Section 1983 suit under the Eleventh Amendment. *See, e.g., Harrison v. Michigan*, 722 F.3d 768, 771 (6th Cir. 2013); *Diaz v. Mich. Dep’t of Corr.*, 703 F.3d 956, 962 (6th Cir. 2013); *McCoy v. Michigan*, 369 F. App’x 646, 653–54 (6th Cir. 2010). Therefore, Plaintiff’s claim against the MDOC is properly dismissed on grounds of immunity. In addition, the State of Michigan (acting through the MDOC) is not a “person” who may be sued under Section 1983 for money damages. *See Lapidus v. Bd. of Regents*, 535 U.S. 613, 617 (2002) (citing *Will v. Mich. Dep’t of State Police*, 491 U.S. 58, 66 (1989)); *Harrison*, 722 F.3d at 771.

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. *Id.*; *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.” *Id.* 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.” *Id.* 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)(ii)).

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); *Street v. Corr. Corp. of Am.*, 102 F.3d 810, 814 (6th Cir. 1996). Because Section 1983 is a method for vindicating federal rights, not a source of substantive rights itself, the first step in an action under Section 1983

is to identify the specific constitutional right allegedly infringed. *Albright v. Oliver*, 510 U.S. 266, 271 (1994).

A. Eighth Amendment Claim

Plaintiff contends that Defendant Piggott’s verbal sexual harassment violated his Eighth Amendment rights. (ECF No. 1, PageID.3.) The Eighth Amendment imposes a constitutional limitation on the power of the states to punish those convicted of crimes. Punishment may not be “barbarous;” nor may it contravene society’s “evolving standards of decency.” *Rhodes v. Chapman*, 452 U.S. 337, 345–46 (1981). The Eighth Amendment, therefore, prohibits conduct by prison officials that involves the “unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain.” *Ivey v. Wilson*, 832 F.2d 950, 954 (6th Cir. 1987) (per curiam) (quoting *Rhodes*, 452 U.S. at 346). The deprivation alleged must result in the denial of the “minimal civilized measure of life’s necessities.” *Rhodes*, 452 U.S. at 347; *see also Wilson v. Yaklich*, 148 F.3d 596, 600–01 (6th Cir. 1998). “[B]ecause the sexual harassment or abuse of an inmate by a corrections officer can never serve a legitimate penological purpose and may well result in severe physical and psychological harm, such abuse can, in certain circumstances, constitute the ‘unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain’ forbidden by the Eighth Amendment.” *Freitas v. Ault*, 109 F.3d 1335, 1338 (8th Cir. 1997) (citations omitted).

“Federal courts have long held that sexual abuse is sufficiently serious to violate the Eighth Amendment. . . . This is true whether the sexual abuse is perpetrated by other inmates or by guards.” *Rafferty v. Trumbull Cnty.*, 915 F.3d 1087, 1095 (6th Cir. 2019) (citing *Farmer v. Brennan*, 511 U.S. 825, 848 (1994) (discussing inmate abuse); *Bishop v. Hackel*, 636 F.3d 757, 761 (6th Cir. 2011) (same); *Washington v. Hively*, 695 F.3d 641, 642 (7th Cir. 2012) (discussing abuse by guards). However, in the context of claims against prison officials, the Sixth Circuit repeatedly has held that the use of harassing or degrading language by a prison official, although

unprofessional and deplorable, does not rise to constitutional dimensions. *See, e.g., Ivey*, 832 F.2d at 950, 954–55 (6th Cir. 1987); *see also Johnson v. Dellatifa*, 357 F.3d 539, 546 (6th Cir. 2004) (finding that harassment and verbal abuse do not constitute the type of infliction of pain that the Eighth Amendment prohibits); *Violett v. Reynolds*, 76 F. App'x 24, 27 (6th Cir. 2003) (concluding that verbal abuse and harassment do not constitute punishment that would support an Eighth Amendment claim).

Moreover, the Sixth Circuit has held that “isolated, brief, and not severe” instances of sexual harassment, without more, do not give rise to Eighth Amendment violations. *Jackson v. Madery*, 158 F. App'x 656, 662 (6th Cir. 2005) (finding that harassing comments, even coupled with one minor instance of sexualized touching during a search, fall short of an Eighth Amendment violation), *abrogated in other part by Maben v. Thelen*, 887 F.3d 252 (6th Cir. 2018); *Violett v. Reynolds*, 76 F. App'x 24, 27 (6th Cir. 2003) (find that an offer of sexual favors was not sufficient to state Eighth Amendment claim); *Johnson v. Ward*, No. 99-1596, 2000 WL 659354, at *1 (6th Cir. May 11, 2000) (“Johnson’s allegation that Ward made an offensive sexual remark to him does not rise to the level of a constitutional violation [as such is merely verbal abuse].”). Other courts have agreed. *See, e.g., Davis v. Goord*, 320 F.3d 346, 353 (2d Cir. 2003); *Keenan v. Hall*, 83 F.3d 1083, 1092 (9th Cir. 1996); *Purcell v. Coughlin*, 790 F.2d 263, 265 (2d Cir. 1986).

The Sixth Circuit has held that severe, coercive verbal harassment may rise to sexual abuse that violates the Eighth Amendment. *Rafferty*, 915 F.3d at 1095. The *Rafferty* court found an Eighth Amendment violation when a male prison official sexually harassed a female prisoner by repeatedly demanding that the prisoner expose herself and masturbate while the official watched and intimidating her into complying. The court noted that, in light of the coercive dynamic of the

relationship between prison staff and prisoners, such demands amounted to sexual abuse. *Id.* at 1096.

Rafferty, however, is distinguishable from Plaintiff's claim. Plaintiff claims that on two occasions,³ Defendant Piggott made sexually suggestive remarks to him. Unlike in *Rafferty*, Plaintiff does not allege that Defendant Piggott made any explicit sexual demands. Under these circumstances, Defendant Piggott's comments did not evidence the type of coercive sexual demands at issue in *Rafferty*. Defendant Piggott's behavior, while offensive and unprofessional, falls short of the severity necessary to state an Eighth Amendment claim. The Court, therefore, will dismiss Plaintiff's Eighth Amendment claim against Defendant Piggott.

B. PREA Claim

Plaintiff next suggests that Defendant Piggott's actions violated the PREA. (ECF No. 1, PageID.3.) While Defendant Piggott's behavior was unprofessional, Plaintiff "has no independent cause of action for any [individual's] failure to comply with the [PREA]." *Beeman v. Heyns*, No. 1:16-cv-27, 2016 WL 1316771, at *12 n.4 (W.D. Mich. Apr. 5, 2016) ("Although not addressed in the Sixth Circuit, district courts have found that the PREA does not create a private cause of action which can be brought by an individual plaintiff." (quoting *Montgomery v. Harper*, No. 5:14-cv-P38R, 2014 WL 4104163, at *2 (W.D. Ky. Aug. 19, 2014))); *see also McCloud v. Prack*, 55 F. Supp. 3d 478, 482 n.2 (W.D.N.Y. 2014) ("[N]othing in the statute suggests that PREA intended to establish a private cause of action for allegations of prison rape, and every court to address the issue has determined that PREA cannot support such a cause of action by an inmate.")

³ Plaintiff vaguely states that "this incident is not a single isolated event, but is and did become a repeated behavior and pattern of the Defendant to verbally and sexually harass the Plaintiff." (ECF No. 1, PageID.3.) Plaintiff's assertion, however, is entirely conclusory and is not supported by any facts about when Defendant Piggott continued to harass him and the nature of the comments made by Defendant Piggott. Given the lack of facts to support this vague statement, the Court concludes that Defendant Piggott's behavior did not rise to the level of that at issue in *Rafferty*.

(quoting *Amaker v. Fischer*, No. 10-cv-977, 2014 WL 4772202, at *14 (W.D.N.Y. Sept. 24, 2014)); *Barhite v. Berghuis*, No. 1:14-cv-670, 2014 WL 4627166, at *5 (W.D. Mich. Sept. 15, 2014) (“Plaintiff’s request is predicated on the assumption that the PREA provides him a cause of action for Defendants’ alleged sexual assaults. It does not.”). Plaintiff’s claim pursuant to the PREA will, therefore, be dismissed.

C. Claims Regarding Violations of MDOC Policy

Plaintiff contends that Defendant Piggott’s actions violated several MDOC policies. (ECF No. 1, PageID.3.) Section 1983, however, does not provide redress for violations of state law. *See Pyles v. Raisor*, 60 F.3d 1211, 1215 (6th Cir. 1995); *Sweeton v. Brown*, 27 F.3d 1162, 1166 (6th Cir. 1994). The only possible way a policy might enjoy constitutional protection would be through the Fourteenth Amendment’s Due Process Clause.

To demonstrate a due process violation, a plaintiff must prove the following elements: (1) a life, liberty, or property interest requiring protection under the Due Process Clause; and (2) a deprivation of that interest (3) without adequate process. *Women’s Med. Prof’l Corp. v. Baird*, 438 F.3d 595, 611 (6th Cir. 2006). “Without a protected liberty or property interest, there can be no federal procedural due process claim.” *Experimental Holdings, Inc. v. Farris*, 503 F.3d 514, 519 (6th Cir. 2007) (citing *Board of Regents of State Colleges v. Roth*, 408 U.S. 564, 579 (1972)). Courts, however, have routinely recognized that a prisoner does not enjoy any federal protected liberty or property interest in state procedure. *See Olim v. Wakinekona*, 461 U.S. 238, 250 (1983); *Laney v. Farley*, 501 F.3d 577, 581 n.2 (6th Cir. 2007); *Brody v. City of Mason*, 250 F.3d 432, 437 (6th Cir. 2001); *Sweeton*, 27 F.3d at 1164. Plaintiff’s allegation that Defendant Piggott violated MDOC policy, therefore, fails to raise a cognizable federal constitutional claim.

Moreover, to the extent Plaintiff seeks to invoke this Court’s supplemental jurisdiction over state law claims for violations of MDOC policy, this Court declines to do so. Ordinarily, where a

district court has exercised jurisdiction over a state law claim solely by virtue of supplemental jurisdiction, and the federal claims are dismissed prior to trial, the court will dismiss the remaining state law claims. *See Experimental Holdings, Inc. v. Farris* 503 F.3d 514, 521 (6th Cir. 2007) (“Generally, once a federal court has dismissed a plaintiff’s federal law claim, it should not reach state law claims.” (citing *United Mine Workers of Am. v. Gibbs*, 383 U.S. 715, 726 (1966))); *Landefeld v. Marion Gen. Hosp., Inc.*, 994 F.2d 1178, 1182 (6th Cir. 1993). In determining whether to retain supplemental jurisdiction, “[a] district court should consider the interests of judicial economy and the avoidance of multiplicity of litigation and balance those interests against needlessly deciding state law issues.” *Landefeld*, 994 F.2d at 1182; *see also Moon v. Harrison Piping Supply*, 465 F.3d 719, 728 (6th Cir. 2006) (“Residual jurisdiction should be exercised only in cases where the interests of judicial economy and the avoidance of multiplicity of litigation outweigh our concern over needlessly deciding state law issues.” (internal quotations omitted)). Dismissal, however, remains “purely discretionary.” *Carlsbad Tech., Inc. v. HIF Bio, Inc.*, 556 U.S. 635, 639 (2009) (citing 28 U.S.C. § 1367(c)); *Orton v. Johnny’s Lunch Franchise, LLC*, 668 F.3d 843, 850 (6th Cir. 2012).

Here, the balance of the relevant considerations weighs against the continued exercise of supplemental jurisdiction. Accordingly, Plaintiff’s state law claims will be dismissed without prejudice.

Conclusion

Having conducted the review required by the Prison Litigation Reform Act, the Court determines that Plaintiff’s federal claims will be dismissed for failure to state a claim, under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A(b), and 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c). Plaintiff’s state law claims alleging violations of MDOC policy will be dismissed without prejudice because the Court declines to exercise supplemental jurisdiction over such claims.

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). Although the Court concludes that Plaintiff’s claims are properly dismissed, the Court does not conclude that any issue Plaintiff might raise on appeal would be frivolous. *Coppedge v. United States*, 369 U.S. 438, 445 (1962). Accordingly, the Court does not certify that an appeal would not be taken in good faith. Should Plaintiff appeal this decision, the Court will assess the \$505.00 appellate filing fee pursuant to Section 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 Section 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: April 10, 2023

/s/ Sally J. Berens
SALLY J. BERENS
United States Magistrate Judge