

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

JAMES ROUNDTREE,

Plaintiff,

Case No. 2:10-cv-172

v.

Honorable Robert Holmes Bell

JENNIFER GRANHOLM 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*, and Plaintiff has paid the initial partial filing fee. 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). Upon review, the Court will dismiss Plaintiff's action for failure to state a claim.

Discussion

I. Factual allegations

Plaintiff presently is incarcerated at Ojibway Correctional Facility (OCF). He pleaded guilty to receiving stolen property, Mich. Comp. Laws § 750.535, armed robbery, Mich. Comp. Laws § 750.529, and two counts of possessing a firearm during the commission of a felony, Mich. Comp. Laws § 750.227b. He was sentenced by the Oakland County Circuit Court to terms of incarceration of 19 to 50 years each for receiving stolen property and armed robbery and two years each for the felony-firearm convictions.¹

In his *pro se* complaint, he sues Governor Jennifer Granholm, Director of the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) Patricia Caruso, Deputy Director of the MDOC Dennis Straub, Administrator of the Office of Legal Affairs Richard B. Stapleton, Regional Prison Administrator Jeri-Ann Sherry, Michigan Parole Board (MPB) Chairman Barbara Sampson, Central Time Computation Unit QCU Analyst June Daman, and the following OCF employees: Warden Linda Tribley, Classification Director unknown Kivisto, and Resident Unit Manager unknown Obradovich.

Plaintiff asserts that his “potential minimum parole date” was July 3, 2010 because of his earned “good-time” disciplinary credits. (Compl., Page ID #5, docket #1.) In June 2010, Plaintiff received a “Parole Board like hearing” with Defendants Kivisto and Obradovich. *Id.* Defendant Kivisto found that Plaintiff was not eligible for parole review at that time. Plaintiff alleges that his due process and equal protection rights were violated because he did not receive a

¹See Michigan Department of Corrections Offender Tracking Information System (last visited Sept. 22, 2010), <http://www.state.mi.us/mdoc/asp/otis2profile.asp?mdocNumber=190985>.

parole hearing after he reached his minimum sentence when taking into account good-time credits earned.

In Claim I, Plaintiff asserts Defendants Tribley, Kivisto and Obradovich violated his due process rights by denying him a parole hearing and, consequently, denying him parole. In Claim II, Plaintiff contends that Defendants Caruso, Straub, Sherry, Tribley and Daman violated his due process rights by implementing outdated and incorrect procedures to deny him a parole hearing. In Claim III, Plaintiff argues that Defendant Sampson violated his due process and equal protection rights by failing to conduct a parole hearing. Plaintiff seeks injunctive relief and compensatory and punitive damages.

II. Failure to state a claim

Plaintiff challenges the denial of his eligibility for a parole hearing. Plaintiff asserts that he was, therefore, denied parole. A challenge to the fact or duration of confinement should be brought as a petition for habeas corpus and is not the proper subject of a civil rights action brought pursuant to § 1983. *See Preiser v. Rodriguez*, 411 U.S. 475, 484, 494 (1973) (the essence of habeas corpus is an attack by a person in custody upon the legality of that custody and the traditional function of the writ is to secure release from illegal custody). The Supreme Court has held that a state prisoner cannot make a cognizable claim under § 1983 for an alleged unconstitutional conviction or for “harm caused by actions whose unlawfulness would render a conviction or sentence invalid” unless a prisoner shows 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” *Heck v. Humphrey*, 512 U.S. 477, 486-87 (1994); *see also Edwards v. Balisok*, 520 U.S. 641, 646-48

(1997). However, in *Wilkinson v. Dotson*, 544 U.S. 74, 82 (2005), the Supreme Court clarified that §1983 remains available to a state prisoner for procedural challenges where success in the action would not necessarily spell immediate or speedier release for the prisoner. *See also Thomas v. Eby*, 481 F.3d 434, 439-40 (6th Cir. 2007) (a plaintiff’s challenge to parole procedures may proceed under § 1983 because it does not automatically imply a shorter sentence). Plaintiff does not directly seek release from prison; rather, he requests monetary damages and an injunction that would require Defendants to provide a parole hearing when any inmate reaches his minimum sentence when taking into account good-time credits earned. As a consequence, under *Wilkinson*, success in this action would not necessarily demonstrate the invalidity of Plaintiff’s continued confinement, so his action does not appear to be *Heck*-barred. *See Wilkinson*, 544 U.S. at 82. Assuming that Plaintiff’s action is cognizable under § 1983, it fails to state a claim as set forth herein.

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 Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007) (quoting *Conley v. Gibson*, 355 U.S. 41, 45-46 (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*, 129 S. Ct. 1937, 1949 (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.” *Ashcroft*, 129 S. Ct. at 1949. 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.” *Ashcroft*, 129 S. Ct. at 1949 (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.” *Ashcroft*, 129 S. Ct. at 1950 (quoting FED. R. CIV. P. 8(a)(2)).

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).

A. Due Process

Plaintiff claims that Defendants violated his due process rights by failing to provide a parole hearing at the time he became eligible for parole and, therefore, denied Plaintiff parole. To establish a procedural due process violation, a plaintiff must prove that (1) he was deprived of a protected liberty or property interest, and (2) such deprivation occurred without the requisite due process of law. *Club Italia Soccer & Sports Org., Inc. v. Charter Twp. of Shelby*, 470 F.3d 286, 296 (6th Cir. 2006); *see also Swihart v. Wilkinson*, 209 F. App’x 456, 458 (6th Cir. 2006). Plaintiff fails to raise a claim of constitutional magnitude because he has no liberty interest in either a parole hearing or being released on parole. There is no protected liberty interest in having a parole hearing. *See Neff v. Johnson*, No. 92-1818, 1993 WL 11880, at *1 (6th Cir. Jan.21, 1993) (no protected liberty interest to a parole interview); *Mayberry v. Hudson*, No. 92-2358, 1993 WL 14575, at *1 (6th

Cir. May 5, 1993) (no liberty interest in parole or parole-eligibility review.). There is no constitutional or inherent right to be conditionally released before the expiration of a prison sentence. *Greenholtz v. Inmates of Neb. Penal & Corr. Complex*, 442 U.S. 1, 7 (1979). Although a state may establish a parole system, it has no duty to do so; thus, the presence of a parole system by itself does not give rise to a constitutionally protected liberty interest in parole release. *Id.* at 7, 11; *Bd. of Pardons v. Allen*, 482 U.S. 369, 373 (1987). Rather, a liberty interest is present only if state law entitles an inmate to release on parole. *Inmates of Orient Corr. Inst. v. Ohio State Adult Parole Auth.*, 929 F.2d 233, 235 (6th Cir. 1991).

In *Sweeton v. Brown*, 27 F.3d 1162, 1164-165 (6th Cir. 1994) (en banc), the Sixth Circuit, noting “the broad powers of the Michigan authorities to deny parole,” held that the Michigan system does not create a liberty interest in parole. Subsequent to its 1994 decision, the Sixth Circuit has recognized the continuing validity of *Sweeton* and has continued to find that Michigan’s parole scheme creates no liberty interest in being released on parole. *See Foster v. Booker*, 595 F.3d 353, 368 (6th Cir. 2010); *Ward v. Stegall*, No. 03-1804, 2004 WL 614581, at *1 (6th Cir. Mar. 24, 2004); *Martin v. Ohio Adult Parole Auth.*, No. 03-3642, 2003 WL 22946604, at *1 (6th Cir. Dec. 8, 2003); *Bullock v. McGinnis*, No. 00-1591, 2001 WL 180978, at *2 (6th Cir. Feb. 14, 2001); *Turnboe v. Stegall*, No. 00-1182, 2000 WL 1679478, at *1 (6th Cir. Nov. 1, 2000).

Also, in unpublished decisions, the Sixth Circuit has held that particular parts of Michigan’s statutory parole scheme do not create a liberty interest in parole. *See Fifer v. Mich. Dep’t of Corr.*, No. 96-2322, 1997 WL 681518, at *1 (6th Cir. Oct. 30, 1997); *Moran v. McGinnis*, No. 95-1330, 1996 WL 304344, at *2 (6th Cir. June 5, 1996); *Leaphart v. Gach*, No. 95-1639, 1995 WL 734480, at *2 (6th Cir. Dec. 11, 1995); *Vertin v. Gabry*, No. 94-2267, 1995 WL 613692, at *1 (6th

Cir. Oct. 18, 1995); *Neff v. Johnson*, No. 92-1818, 1993 WL 11880, at *1 (6th Cir. Jan. 21, 1993); *Janiskee v. Mich. Dep't of Corr.*, No. 91-1103, 1991 WL 76181, at *1 (6th Cir. May 9, 1991); *Haynes v. Hudson*, No. 89-2006, 1990 WL 41025, at *1 (6th Cir. Apr. 10, 1990). In addition, the Michigan Supreme Court has recognized that there exists no liberty interest in parole under the Michigan system. *Glover v. Mich. Parole Bd.*, 596 N.W.2d 598, 603-04 (Mich. 1999).

Until Plaintiff has served his fifty-year maximum sentence, he has no reasonable expectation of liberty. In the absence of a liberty interest, even an allegation of arbitrary or capricious denial of release on parole states no federal claim. *See Haynes*, 1990 WL 41025, at *1. The discretionary parole system in Michigan holds out “no more than a mere hope that the benefit will be obtained.” *Greenholtz*, 442 U.S. at 11. Defendants’ failure or refusal to consider Plaintiff for parole, therefore, implicates no federal right. In the absence of a liberty interest, Plaintiff fails to state a claim for a violation of his procedural due process rights.

B. Equal Protection

Plaintiff generally claims that Defendant Sampson violated his equal protection rights by failing to conduct a parole interview when he served his minimum sentence. The Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment provides that a state may not “deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws,” which is essentially a direction that all persons similarly situated should be treated alike. U.S. CONST., amend. XIV; *City of Cleburne v. Cleburne Living Ctr.*, 473 U.S. 432, 439 (1985). Plaintiff’s allegations on this point are wholly conclusory. He merely states that his equal protection rights have been violated. Plaintiff provides no specific factual allegations to support his contention. Conclusory allegations of unconstitutional conduct without specific factual allegations fail to state a claim under § 1983. *See Lillard v. Shelby*

County Bd. of Educ., 76 F.3d 716, 726 (6th Cir. 1996) (citing *Chapman v. City of Detroit*, 808 F.2d 459, 465 (6th Cir. 1986)); *Smith v. Rose*, 760 F.2d 102, 106 (6th Cir. 1985); *Turnboe v. Stegall*, No. 00-1182, 2000 WL 1679478, at *2 (6th Cir. Nov. 1, 2000).

C. State Law

Plaintiff also claims that Defendants violated state law by denying Plaintiff a parole hearing. Section 1983 does not provide redress for a violation of a state law. *Pyles v. Raisor*, 60 F.3d 1211, 1215 (6th Cir. 1995); *Sweeton*, 27 F.3d at 1166. To the extent that Plaintiff's complaint presents allegations under state law, this Court declines to exercise jurisdiction. "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 state law claims should be dismissed without reaching their merits." *Coleman v. Huff*, No. 97-1916, 1998 WL 476226, at *1 (6th Cir. Aug. 3, 1998) (citing *Faughender v. City of N. Olmsted, Ohio*, 927 F.2d 909, 917 (6th Cir. 1991)); *see also Landefeld v. Marion Gen. Hosp., Inc.*, 994 F.2d 1178, 1182 (6th Cir. 1993).

Conclusion

Having conducted the review now required by the Prison Litigation Reform Act, the Court determines that Plaintiff's action will be dismissed for 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 \$455.00 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 \$455.00 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: September 27, 2010

/s/ Robert Holmes Bell
ROBERT HOLMES BELL
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE