

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN
NORTHERN DIVISION

SHAWN DEMETRIS BRAGG ROSS,

Plaintiff,

Case No. 2:22-cv-94

v.

Honorable Maarten Vermaat

UNKNOWN MILLER et al.,

Defendants.

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. 10.) 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. 12, PageID.71.)

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 the 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 Chippewa Correctional Facility (URF) in Kincheloe, Chippewa County, Michigan. The events about which he complains occurred at that facility. Plaintiff sues Defendants Corrections Officer Unknown Miller, Sergeant Unknown Motie, and Lieutenant Unknown Watson.

Plaintiff alleges that on March 8, 2021, he was sitting in the chow hall eating dinner when a fight broke out between two other prisoners. Although Plaintiff was not involved in the fight, Defendant Miller somehow ended up shooting him in the back with a taser. Plaintiff states that

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. Feb. 10, 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”).

video footage will show that Defendant Miller was unprofessional and asserts that Defendant Miller should have been trained to use a taser safely. Plaintiff claims that Defendants Motie and Watson covered up the incident when they refused to send Plaintiff a copy of the critical incident report detailing all the facts and naming everyone who had played a role in the cover-up. Plaintiff states that as a result of being shot with a taser, he suffers from blurry vision in one eye and tingling in his back.

Plaintiff states that Defendants violated his rights under the Eighth Amendment. Plaintiff seeks compensatory and punitive damages, as well as declaratory relief.

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 § 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).

As stated above, Plaintiff claims that Defendants violated his Eighth Amendment rights. The Eighth Amendment embodies a constitutional limitation on the power of the states to punish those convicted of a crime. Punishment may not be “barbarous” nor may it contravene society’s “evolving standards of decency.” *See Rhodes v. Chapman*, 452 U.S. 337, 345–46 (1981); *see also Trop v. Dulles*, 356 U.S. 86, 101 (1958). The Eighth Amendment also prohibits conditions of confinement which, although not physically barbarous, “involve the unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain.” *Rhodes*, 452 U.S. at 346. Among unnecessary and wanton inflictions of pain are those that are “totally without penological justification.” *Id.*

Plaintiff’s claim involving the use of a taser must be analyzed under the Supreme Court authority limiting the use of force against prisoners. This analysis must be made in the context of the constant admonitions by the Supreme Court regarding the deference that courts must accord to prison or jail officials as they attempt to maintain order and discipline within dangerous institutional settings. *See, e.g., Whitley v. Albers*, 475 U.S. 312, 321–22 (1986).

Generally, restrictions and even harsh conditions of confinement are not necessarily cruel and unusual punishment prohibited by the Eighth Amendment. *Rhodes*, 452 U.S. 347. The Supreme Court has held that “whenever guards use force to keep order,” the standards enunciated in *Whitley*, 475 U.S. 312, should be applied. *Hudson v. McMillian*, 503 U.S. 1, 7 (1992); *see also Wilkins v. Gaddy*, 559 U.S. 34, 37–39 (2010). Under *Whitley*, the core judicial inquiry is “whether force was applied in a good-faith effort to maintain or restore discipline, or maliciously and sadistically to cause harm.” *Hudson*, 503 U.S. at 6–7; *Wilkins*, 559 U.S. at 37. In determining whether the use of force is wanton and unnecessary, the court should evaluate the need for application of force, the relationship between that need and the amount of force used, the threat “reasonably perceived by the responsible officials,” and any efforts made to temper the severity of the forceful response. *Hudson*, 503 U.S. at 7 (citing *Whitley*, 475 U.S. at 321); *accord Griffin v. Hardrick*, 604 F.3d 949, 953–54 (6th Cir. 2010); *McHenry v. Chadwick*, 896 F.2d 184 (6th Cir. 1990). Physical restraints are constitutionally permissible where there is penological justification for their use. *Rhodes*, 452 U.S. at 346; *Jones v. Toombs*, No. 95-1395, 1996 WL 67750, at *1 (6th Cir. Feb. 15, 1996); *Hayes v. Toombs*, No. 91-890, 1994 WL 28606, at * 1 (6th Cir. Feb. 1, 1994); *Rivers v. Pitcher*, No. 95-1167, 1995 WL 603313, at *2 (6th Cir. Oct. 12, 1995).

In this case, Plaintiff was not the intended object of the force used, but was merely a victim of being in the wrong place at the wrong time when Defendant Miller attempted to break up a fight between two other prisoners. Plaintiff attaches copies of grievance responses to his complaint.

According to the step I grievance response dated March 22, 2021:

Prisoner Ross was grieving Officer Miller for being shot with an ECD accidentally after a fight broke out in the East Kitchen. Prisoner Ross was complaining that he was having no feeling and ... his left eye was blurry.

(ECF No. 1-2, PageID.18.)

The investigation was summarized as follows:

Prisoner Ross was shot in the back accidentally with [an] ECD while eating in the kitchen on 3/8/2021 by Officer Miller who was attempting to end a fight of two other Round Unit prisoners. I responded to the incident and overheard him being asked by Lt. Watson if he wanted to see Health Care. Lt. Watson stated that prisoner Ross went to see health care after he had finished his dinner. I talked with prisoner Ross on 3/22/2021 in Round Unit about his grievance. Ross stated that he just wanted it on record that for a couple days after the incident he still had a “tingling” feeling on his left side and that his eye was blurry. I asked Ross if he was still having those issues which he stated, “The tingling is gone but my left eye is still blurry sometimes” and that he had put a kite into the optometrist.

(*Id.*) Plaintiff signed off on the grievance and it was considered complete. (*Id.*) Plaintiff, however, did appeal the results of his grievance to step II and III. Plaintiff’s appeal was denied at each step because his issue had been considered and investigated and a proper decision had been rendered. (*Id.*, PageID.17, 20.)

Plaintiff also includes a copy of a kite response, stating that he suffered from numbness on the left side of his body and blurry vision in his left eye after having been tasered on March 8, 2021. (*Id.*, Page ID.21.) The response indicated that Plaintiff had been evaluated for this issue on March 12, 2021, and that it had been addressed. (*Id.*)

The Court notes that allegations of negligence fall short of the deliberate indifference required to state an Eighth Amendment claim. *See Farmer v. Brennan*, 511 U.S. 825, 835 (1994) (holding that an Eighth Amendment violation requires a “state of mind more blameworthy than negligence”). In *Rhodes v. Michigan*, the Sixth Circuit noted that the Supreme Court’s precedent “is clear that the deliberate-indifference standard demarcates accidents and ordinary injuries from actionable conduct in the Eighth Amendment context.” *Rhodes v. Michigan*, 10 F.4th 665, 678 (6th Cir. 2021) (*citing Farmer*, 511 U.S. at 835, 840). The decision in *Rhodes*, while not discussing the concept of recklessness directly, suggests agreement with the definition of recklessness set forth in *Phaneuf v. Collins*, 509 F. App’x 427, 432 (6th Cir. 2012), which held that “deliberate

indifference is akin to criminal recklessness—that is, *knowingly* taking an unjustifiably high risk of causing serious harm.” *Id.* at 432.

The facts of this case fail to show that Defendant Miller acted with anything more than negligence. It appears from the complaint and the attachments thereto that Defendant Miller accidentally tasered Plaintiff while attempting to break up a fight between two other prisoners and that Plaintiff was simply caught in the crossfire. Plaintiff fails to allege that Defendant Miller knew or should have known that he would be injured, or that Defendant Miller’s use of a taser was not warranted by the conflict between the other prisoners. In addition, it is clear from the record that Plaintiff was evaluated by medical staff following the incident and that the incident was investigated in response to Plaintiff’s grievance. The Court concludes that Plaintiff’s excessive force claim against Defendant Miller is properly dismissed.

Moreover, although Plaintiff baldly asserts that Defendants Motie and Watson covered up Defendant Miller’s lack of professionalism, such a contention is entirely conclusory. Nor does Plaintiff allege any facts indicating that Defendants Motie or Watson failed to properly supervise Defendant Miller, or that they were involved in training Defendant Miller. In fact, nothing in Plaintiff’s recitation of the facts even indicates that Defendant Miller acted unprofessionally. 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. The court must determine whether the complaint contains “enough facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.” *Id.* at 570. The court need not accept “[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678. “The plausibility standard is not akin to a ‘probability requirement,’ but 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)).

In addition, to the extent that Plaintiff is asserting that Defendants Motie and Watson failed to train, supervise, or properly investigate his grievance, the Sixth Circuit repeatedly has summarized the minimum required to constitute active conduct by a supervisory official:

“[A] supervisory official’s failure to supervise, control or train the offending individual is not actionable *unless* the supervisor either encouraged the specific incident of misconduct or in some other way directly participated in it.” *Shehee*, 199 F.3d at 300 (emphasis added) (internal quotation marks omitted). We have interpreted this standard to mean that “at a minimum,” the plaintiff must show that the defendant “at least implicitly authorized, approved, or knowingly acquiesced in the unconstitutional conduct of the offending officers.”

Peatross v. City of Memphis, 818 F.3d 233, 242 (6th Cir. 2016) (quoting *Shehee*, 199 F.3d at 300, and citing *Phillips v. Roane Cnty.*, 534 F.3d 531, 543 (6th Cir. 2008)); *see also Copeland v. Machulis*, 57 F.3d 476, 481 (6th Cir. 1995) (citing *Rizzo v. Goode*, 423 U.S. 362, 375–76 (1976), and *Bellamy v. Bradley*, 729 F.2d 416, 421 (6th Cir. 1984)); *Walton v. City of Southfield*, 995 F.2d 1331, 1340 (6th Cir. 1993); *Leach v. Shelby Cnty. Sheriff*, 891 F.2d 1241, 1246 (6th Cir. 1989).

In addition, the Court notes that 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 Defendants Motie and Watson engaged in any active unconstitutional behavior. Accordingly, he fails to state a claim against them.

Conclusion

Having conducted the review required by the Prison Litigation Reform Act, the Court determines that Plaintiff’s complaint 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). 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 § 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: August 8, 2022

/s/ *Maarten Vermaat*

Maarten Vermaat
United States Magistrate Judge