

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF OHIO  
EASTERN DIVISION

<b>Shawn Hopkins,</b>	)	<b>CASE NO. 1:11 CV 1383</b>
	)	
<b>Plaintiff,</b>	)	<b>JUDGE PATRICIA A. GAUGHAN</b>
	)	
<b>v.</b>	)	
	)	<b><u>Memorandum of Opinion and Order</u></b>
<b>William Mason, et al.,</b>	)	
	)	
<b>Defendants.</b>	)	

**INTRODUCTION**

*Pro se* Plaintiff Shawn Hopkins filed this action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 against Cuyahoga County Prosecutor William Mason and the Cuyahoga County Public Defenders Office. In the Complaint, Plaintiff alleges that his current criminal prosecution on domestic violence charges is violating his constitutional rights. He seeks immediate release and an award of monetary damages.

**BACKGROUND**

Plaintiff alleges he is currently being held on charges of domestic violence and felonious assault in violation of his constitutional rights. He indicates he was sentenced to 180 days in jail on October 22, 2010, for misdemeanor domestic violence. After serving 90 days of that sentence, he was returned to the Cuyahoga County Jail to await trial on new charges of domestic violence and felonious assault. His former girlfriend reported to police that he punched her in the face and ruptured both of her ear drums on October 26, 2010. She claimed she had been treated at Metro

Health Medical Center. However, none of Plaintiff's attorneys were able to obtain a medical record of her visit. Plaintiff contends the charges were fabricated. He indicates three attorneys from the Public Defenders Office have resigned from his case, and one attorney gave him incorrect information about his speedy trial rights. He asserts the Public Defenders Office has been assisting the prosecutors. He claims Mr. Mason is responsible for multiple violations of his constitutional rights.

### **STANDARD OF REVIEW**

Although *pro se* pleadings are liberally construed, *Boag v. MacDougall*, 454 U.S. 364, 365 (1982) (per curiam); *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972), the Court is required to dismiss an *in forma pauperis* action under 28 U.S.C. §1915(e) if it fails to state a claim upon which relief can be granted, or if it lacks an arguable basis in law or fact.<sup>1</sup> *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319 (1989); *Lawler v. Marshall*, 898 F.2d 1196 (6th Cir. 1990); *Sistrunk v. City of Strongsville*, 99 F.3d 194, 197 (6th Cir. 1996). A claim lacks an arguable basis in law or fact when it is premised on an indisputably meritless legal theory or when the factual contentions are clearly baseless. *Neitzke*, 490 U.S. at 327. A cause of action fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted when it lacks "plausibility." *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 564 (2007). A pleading must contain a "short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief." *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 129 S.Ct. 1937, 1949 (2009). The factual allegations in the pleading must be sufficient to

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<sup>1</sup> An *in forma pauperis* claim may be dismissed *sua sponte*, without prior notice to the Plaintiff and without service of process on the Defendant, if the Court explicitly states that it is invoking section 1915(e) [formerly 28 U.S.C. § 1915(d)] and is dismissing the claim for one of the reasons set forth in the statute. *McGore v. Wrigglesworth*, 114 F.3d 601, 608-09 (6th Cir. 1997); *Spruytte v. Walters*, 753 F.2d 498, 500 (6th Cir. 1985), *cert. denied*, 474 U.S. 1054 (1986); *Harris v. Johnson*, 784 F.2d 222, 224 (6th Cir. 1986); *Brooks v. Seiter*, 779 F.2d 1177, 1179 (6th Cir. 1985).

raise the right to relief above the speculative level on the assumption that all the allegations in the Complaint are true. *Bell Atl. Corp.*, 550 U.S. at 555. The Plaintiff is not required to include detailed factual allegations, but must provide more than “an unadorned, the-[D]efendant-unlawfully-harmed-me accusation.” *Iqbal*, 129 S.Ct. at 1949. A pleading that offers legal conclusions or a simple recitation of the elements of a cause of action will not meet this pleading standard. *Id.* In reviewing a Complaint, the Court must construe the pleading in the light most favorable to the Plaintiff. *Bibbo v. Dean Witter Reynolds, Inc.*, 151 F.3d 559, 561 (6th Cir.1998).

### **ANALYSIS**

#### **I. Parties**

As an initial matter, neither of the Defendants is subject to suit in a civil rights action. Mr. Mason is entitled to absolute immunity from damages for initiating a prosecution and presenting the state’s case. *Imbler v. Pachtman*, 424 U.S. 409, 431 (1976); *Pusey v. Youngstown*, 11 F.3d 652, 658 (6th Cir. 1993). A prosecutor must exercise his or her best professional judgment both in deciding which suits to bring and in conducting them in court. *Skinner v. Govorchin*, 463 F.3d 518, 525 (6th Cir. 2006). This duty could not be properly performed if the prosecutor is constrained in making every decision by the potential consequences of personal liability in a suit for damages. *Id.* These suits could be expected with some frequency, for a defendant often will transform his resentment at being prosecuted into the belief that the prosecutor is acting improperly or maliciously. *Imbler*, 424 U.S. at 424-25; *Skinner*, 463 F.3d at 525. Absolute immunity is therefore extended to prosecuting attorneys when the actions in question are those of an advocate. *Spurlock v. Thompson*, 330 F.3d 791, 798 (6th Cir.2003). Immunity is granted not only for actions directly

related to initiating a prosecution and presenting the state's case, but also to activities undertaken "in connection with [the] duties in functioning as a prosecutor." *Imbler*, 424 U.S. at 431; *Higgason v. Stephens*, 288 F.3d 868, 877 (6th Cir. 2002).

Here, Plaintiff does not describe any actions committed by Mr. Mason. He contends the most recent domestic violence charge was fabricated by the alleged victim and indicates that there is no medical report to substantiate her allegations. It appears he believes Mr. Mason should not have initiated the prosecution and should now dismiss the charges. These are the type of actions for which immunity is given to prosecutors. Therefore, the Court finds that Mr. Mason is absolutely immune from damages for his decision to prosecute the Plaintiff.

In addition, the Public Defenders Office is not subject to suit under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. To establish a prima facie case under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, Plaintiff must assert that a person acting under color of state law deprived him of rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the constitution or laws of the United States. *Parratt v. Taylor*, 451 U.S. 527, 535 (1981). A public defender or a court-appointed defense attorney, while acting in that capacity, is not a state actor for purposes of § 1983. *Polk County v. Dodson*, 454 U.S. 312, 321 (1981).

A private party may be found to have acted under color of state law to establish the first element of this cause of action only when the party "acted together with or ... obtained significant aid from state officials" and did so to such a degree that his or her actions may properly be characterized as "state action." *Lugar v. Edmondson Oil Co.*, 457 U.S. 922, 937 (1982). An individual may also be considered a state actor if he or she exercises powers traditionally reserved to a state. *Jackson v. Metropolitan Edison Co.*, 419 U.S. 345, 352 (1974). There are no allegations in the Complaint reasonably suggesting that any of the attorneys at the Public Defenders Office

engaged in conduct that could be characterized as state action.

## **II. Younger Doctrine**

Finally, this Court cannot order Mr. Mason or the Cuyahoga County Court of Common Pleas to dismiss the charges against the Plaintiff and release him from custody. A federal court must decline to interfere with pending state proceedings involving important state interests unless extraordinary circumstances are present. *See Younger v. Harris*, 401 U.S. 37, 44-45 (1971). When a person is the target of an ongoing state action involving important state matters, he or she cannot interfere with the pending state action by maintaining a parallel federal action involving claims that could have been raised in the state case. *Watts v. Burkhardt*, 854 F.2d 839, 844-48 (6th Cir.1988). If the state defendant files such a case, *Younger* abstention requires the federal court to defer to the state proceeding. *Id*; *see also Pennzoil Co. v. Texaco, Inc.*, 481 U.S. 1, 15 (1987). Based on these principles, abstention is appropriate if: (1) the state proceedings are on-going; (2) the state proceedings implicate important state interests; and (3) the state proceedings afford an adequate opportunity to raise federal questions. *Middlesex County Ethics Comm. v. Garden State Bar Ass'n*, 457 U.S. 423, 432 (1982). Abstention is mandated whether the state court proceeding is criminal, quasi-criminal, or civil in nature as long as federal court intervention “unduly interferes with the legitimate activities of the state.” *Younger*, 401 U.S. at 44.

All three factors supporting abstention are present in this case. The issues presented in the Complaint are clearly the subject of a pending state court criminal matter and enforcing state criminal codes is of paramount state interest. *See Younger*, 401 U.S. at 44-45. Furthermore, Plaintiff has not set forth facts which reasonably suggest the Ohio courts cannot or will not provide an adequate opportunity for him to raise his constitutional claims. Consequently, this Court is

required to abstain from intervening in the criminal case against Plaintiff pending in the Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Court.

**CONCLUSION**

Accordingly, this action is dismissed pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §1915(e). The Court certifies, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3), that an appeal from this decision could not be taken in good faith.<sup>2</sup>

IT IS SO ORDERED.

/s/ Patricia A. Gaughan  
PATRICIA A. GAUGHAN  
United States District Judge

Dated: 10/18/11

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<sup>2</sup> 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3) provides:

An appeal may not be taken *in forma pauperis* if the trial court certifies that it is not taken in good faith.