

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
MIDDLE DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE
COOKEVILLE DIVISION

JAMES BURTON,)	
No. 4057,)	
)	
Plaintiff,)	No. 2:15-cv-00051
)	Chief Judge Sharp
v.)	
)	
FENTRESS CO. JAIL, et al.,)	
)	
Defendants.)	

MEMORANDUM

Plaintiff James Burton, a pre-trial detainee being held by the Fentress County Jail in Jamestown, Tennessee, filed this *pro se, in forma pauperis* action against defendants Fentress County Jail and Faye Engel Barna pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983. (Docket No. 1).

The plaintiff’s complaint is before the court for an initial review pursuant to the Prison Litigation Reform Act (“PLRA”), 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A, and 42 U.S.C. § 1997e.

I. PLRA Screening Standard

Under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B), the court must dismiss any portion of a civil complaint filed *in forma pauperis* that fails to state a claim upon which relief can be granted, is frivolous, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. Section 1915A similarly requires initial review of any “complaint in a civil action in which a prisoner seeks redress from a governmental entity or officer or employee of a governmental entity,” *id.* § 1915A(a), and summary dismissal of the complaint on the same grounds as those articulated in § 1915(e)(2)(B). *Id.* § 1915A(b).

The Sixth Circuit has confirmed that the dismissal standard articulated by the Supreme Court

in *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662 (2009), and *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544 (2007), “governs dismissals for failure to state a claim under those statutes because the relevant statutory language tracks the language in Rule 12(b)(6).” *Hill v. Lappin*, 630 F.3d 468, 470–71 (6th Cir. 2010). Thus, to survive scrutiny on initial review, “a complaint must contain sufficient factual matter, accepted as true, to ‘state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.’” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678 (quoting *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.” *Id.* (citing *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 556). “[A] district court must (1) view the complaint in the light most favorable to the plaintiff and (2) take all well-pleaded factual allegations as true.” *Tackett v. M & G Polymers, USA, LLC*, 561 F.3d 478, 488 (6th Cir. 2009) (citing *Gunasekera v. Irwin*, 551 F.3d 461, 466 (6th Cir. 2009) (citations omitted)).

Although *pro se* pleadings are to be held to a less stringent standard than formal pleadings drafted by lawyers, *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 520–21 (1972); *Jourdan v. Jabe*, 951 F.2d 108, 110 (6th Cir. 1991), the courts’ “duty to be ‘less stringent’ with *pro se* complaints does not require us to conjure up [unpleaded] allegations.” *McDonald v. Hall*, 610 F.2d 16, 19 (1st Cir. 1979) (citation omitted).

II. Section 1983 Standard

The plaintiff brings his claims pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983. Title 42 U.S.C. § 1983 creates a cause of action against any person who, acting under color of state law, abridges “rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws” To state a claim under § 1983, the plaintiff must allege and show two elements: (1) that he was deprived of a right secured by the Constitution or laws of the United States; and (2) that the deprivation was caused by a person

acting under color of state law. *Tahfs v. Proctor*, 316 F.3d 584, 590 (6th Cir. 2003); 42 U.S.C. § 1983.

III. Alleged Facts

The complaint sets forth a number of allegations by the plaintiff, a pre-trial detainee, concerning an on-going state criminal prosecution of the plaintiff by Fentress County, Tennessee, and a prior civil case brought in state court by the plaintiff against Faye Barna, a private citizen and one of the named defendants in the instant case. (Docket No. 1 at pp. 3, 6-9).

IV. Analysis

First, the plaintiff names Faye Engel Barna as a defendant to this § 1983 action. Based on the allegations in the complaint, Ms. Barna is a private citizen residing in Fentress County, Tennessee. As a private citizen, Ms. Barna is not a “person acting under color of state law” pursuant to § 1983. Thus, all § 1983 claims against Ms. Barna be dismissed.

Next, the plaintiff names the Fentress County Jail as a defendant to this action. However, a jail or justice center is a building where prisoners are held and therefore is not a “person” that can be sued under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. *Cf. Fuller v. Cocran*, No. 1:05-CV-76, 2005 WL 1802415, at *3 (E.D. Tenn. July 27, 2005) (dismissing § 1983 claims against the Bradley County Justice Center on the same basis); *Seals v. Grainger County Jail*, No. 3:04CV606, 2005 WL 1076326, at *1 (E.D. Tenn. May 6, 2005) (“The Grainger County Jail, however, is not a suable entity within the meaning of § 1983.”). Thus, the complaint fails to state a § 1983 claim upon which relief can be granted against the Fentress County Jail.

To the extent the *pro se* plaintiff’s claims against the Fentress County Jail might be liberally construed as claims against Fentress County, Tennessee, in order to sue a local government under

§ 1983, the plaintiff must allege that “it is [the] execution of [the] government's policy or custom . . . [that] inflicts the injury” *Monell v. Dep't of Soc. Serv.*, 436 U.S. 658, 694, 98 S. Ct. 2018, 56 L.Ed.2d 611 (1978). In short, for Fentress County to be liable to the plaintiff under § 1983, there must be a direct causal link between an official policy or custom and the alleged violation of the plaintiff's constitutional rights. *City of Canton v. Harris*, 489 U.S. 378, 385 (1989).

Here, the plaintiff's allegations against Fentress County center around the plaintiff's belief that he is the victim of a corrupt legal and political system. Considering the request requested in the complaint, it appears the plaintiff is asking this court to interfere with an ongoing state criminal prosecution of the plaintiff in Fentress County. To the extent that the complaint asks the court to intervene in the pending state criminal proceedings against the plaintiff, the law is well-settled that a federal court should not interfere with pending state court criminal proceedings, absent the threat of “great and immediate” irreparable injury. *Younger v. Harris*, 401 U.S. 37, 46 (1971). It is also clear that a federal court may *sua sponte* raise the issue of *Younger* abstention. *Bellotti v. Baird*, 428 U.S. 132, 143-44 n.10 (1976). *Younger* abstention applies where the federal plaintiff seeks injunctive or declaratory judgment relief. *Carroll v. City of Mount Clemens*, 139 F.3d 1072, 1074 (6th Cir. 1998).

In *Younger*, the Supreme Court held that, absent extraordinary circumstances, federal equity jurisdiction may not be used to enjoin pending state prosecutions. The *Younger* abstention doctrine is based on the principle that the states have a special interest in enforcing their own laws in their own courts. *Id.* at 44. The rule is “designed to permit state courts to try state cases free from interference by federal courts, particularly where the party to the federal case may fully litigate his claim before the state court.” *Zalman v. Armstrong*, 802 F.2d 199, 205 (6th Cir.1986) (internal

quotations omitted). Abstention in favor of state court proceedings is proper where there exists: (1) an ongoing state judicial proceeding; (2) an important state interest; and (3) an adequate opportunity in the state judicial proceedings to raise constitutional challenges. *Middlesex County Ethics Committee v. Garden State Bar Ass'n*, 457 U.S. 423, 432 (1982); *Fieger v. Thomas*, 74 F.3d 740, 744 (6th Cir. 1996).

The three factors that support *Younger* abstention are present in this case. First, a state criminal prosecution of the plaintiff appears to be underway. Second, there can be no doubt that state criminal proceedings implicate important state interests. *See, e.g., Cooper v. Parrish*, 203 F.3d 937, 954 (6th Cir. 2000). Third, while the complaint expresses the plaintiff's dissatisfaction with the state court judge's rulings in his criminal case, the complaint does not allege that the plaintiff's motions for a speedy trial have been ignored or denied. Because there is insufficient evidence in the complaint from which to draw this conclusion, there is no present indication in the record before the court that the state court would refuse to consider the plaintiff's constitutional claims; thus, presumably the state court proceedings provide an adequate forum in which the plaintiff can raise any constitutional challenges.

However, if the plaintiff raises his constitutional challenges in state court and the trial court denies or otherwise fails to consider his constitutional claims, he may exercise his right to an appeal under Tennessee law. The plaintiff also may oblige himself of state post-conviction proceedings in the event he is convicted of the charged offense(s).

There are exceptions to the *Younger* doctrine: (1) "the state proceeding is motivated by a desire to harass or is conducted in bad faith," *Huffman v. Pursue, Ltd.*, 420 U.S. 592, 611; (2) "the challenged statute is flagrantly and patently violative of express constitutional prohibitions," *Moore*

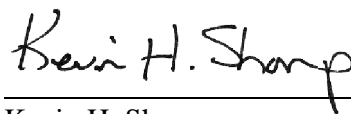
v. *Sims*, 442 U.S. 415, 424 (1979)(quoting *Huffman*, 420 U.S. at 611); or, (3) there is “an extraordinarily pressing need for immediate federal equitable relief.” *Kugler v. Helfant*, 421 U.S. 117, 125 (1975). These exceptions have been interpreted narrowly. *Zalman v. Armstrong*, 802 F.2d 199, 205 (6th Cir. 1986). In order to overcome the bar of *Younger* abstention, a plaintiff must do more than set forth mere allegations of bad faith or harassment. See *Amanatullah v. Colorado Board of Medical Examiners*, 187 F.3d 1160, 1165 (10th Cir.1 999) (citing *Phelps v. Hamilton*, 122 F.3d 885, 889 (10th Cir.1997)). The burden on a plaintiff is high, and the allegations of the instant complaint do not establish that any exception to the *Younger* doctrine is warranted in this case at this time.

V. Conclusion

As set forth above, the court finds the plaintiff’s complaint fails to state claims upon which relief can be granted under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. 28 U.S.C. § 1915A. In the absence of an actionable claim, the court must dismiss the complaint *sua sponte*. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2). Accordingly, the complaint will be dismissed.

This dismissal is without prejudice to the plaintiff’s ability to pursue any remedies available to him by way of a petition for writ of *habeas corpus*.

An appropriate order will be entered.



Kevin H. Sharp
Chief United States District Judge