
IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF UTAH

LANDIN MOOSMAN,

Petitioner,

v.

STATE OF UTAH,

Respondent.

**MEMORANDUM DECISION &
DISMISSAL ORDER**

Case No. 2:17-CV-951-RJS

Chief District Judge Robert J. Shelby

BACKGROUND

- August 23, 2017 Petitioner submitted federal habeas-corpus petition with in forma pauperis motion. (Doc. Nos. 1 & 8.)
- October 12, 2017 Petitioner ordered to within thirty days file inmate-account statement. (Doc. No. 2.)
- November 21, 2017 Petitioner's inmate-account statement filed. (Doc. No. 4.)
- January 2, 2018 Petitioner's in forma pauperis motion granted. (Doc. No. 7.) Petitioner moves for appointment of pro bono counsel. (Doc. No. 9.)
- March 15, 2018 Petitioner files notice of address change. (Doc. No. 11.)
- May 3, 2018 State ordered to answer Petition. (Doc. No. 12.) Petitioner ordered to reply to answer within thirty days of answer's filing. (Id.) Petitioner's motion for pro bono counsel denied. (Id.)
- June 18, 2018 Answer filed. (Doc. No. 14.)
- July 31, 2018 Order number 12 returned to sender, noting, "Does not live here." (Doc. No. 15.)
- August 13, 2018 Petitioner files notice of address change. (Doc. No. 16.)
- August 14, 2018 State files copy of Petitioner's e-mail to Erin Riley, attorney for State. (Doc. No. 17.)

- October 3, 2018 Petitioner ordered to within thirty days show cause why this action should not be dismissed for failure to reply to State’s answer. (Doc. No. 18.)
- October 24, 2018 Petitioner files notice of address change. (Doc. No. 19.)
- April 8, 2019 Petitioner again ordered to within thirty days show cause why this action should not be dismissed for failure to reply to State’s answer. (Doc. No. 20.)

Petitioner has not contacted the Court since October 24, 2018 (over seven months ago).

ANALYSIS

Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 41(b) allows involuntary dismissal of an action “[i]f the [petitioner] fails to prosecute or to comply with . . . a court order.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 41(b). This Court may dismiss actions sua sponte for failure to prosecute. *Olsen v. Mapes*, 333 F.3d 1199, 1204 n.3 (10th Cir. 2003) (“Although the language of Rule 41(b) requires that the [respondent] file a motion to dismiss, the Rule has long been interpreted to permit courts to dismiss actions sua sponte for a [petitioner’s] failure to prosecute or comply with . . . court orders.”); see also *Link v. Wabash R.R. Co.*, 370 U.S. 626, 630 (stating court has inherent authority to clear “calendar[] of cases that have remained dormant because of the inaction or dilatoriness of the parties seeking relief”); *Bills v. United States*, 857 F.2d 1404, 1405 (10th Cir. 1988) (“Dismissal for failure to prosecute is a recognized standard operating procedure in order to clear the deadwood from the courts’ calendars where there has been prolonged and unexcused delay.”).

In determining whether to dismiss this action, the Court applies the factors from *Ehrenhaus v. Reynolds*, 965 F.2d 916 (10th Cir. 1992)--i.e., “(1) the degree of actual prejudice to [Respondent]”; (2) “the amount of interference with the judicial process”; (3) the litigant’s culpability; (4) whether the noncomplying litigant was warned that dismissal was a likely

sanction; and (5) “the efficacy of lesser sanctions.” *Id.* at 921 (internal quotation marks omitted); see also *Davis v. Miller*, 571 F.3d 1058, 1061 (10th Cir. 2009) (applying Ehrenhaus factors in habeas case). Dismissal with prejudice is appropriate only when these factors overshadow the judicial system’s strong preference to decide cases on the merits. *DeBardeleben v. Quinlan*, 937 F.2d 502, 504 (10th Cir. 1991). The Ehrenhaus factors are not “a rigid test; rather, they represent criteria for the district court to consider [before] imposing dismissal as a sanction.” *Ehrenhaus*, 965 F.2d at 921; see also *Lee v. Max Int’l, LLC*, 638 F.3d 1318, 1323 (10th Cir. 2011) (“The Ehrenhaus factors are simply a non-exclusive list of sometimes-helpful ‘criteria’ or guide posts the district court may wish to ‘consider’ in the exercise of what must always be a discretionary function.”); *Chavez v. City of Albuquerque*, 402 F.3d 1039, 1044 (10th Cir. 2005) (describing Ehrenhaus factors as “not exhaustive, nor . . . equiponderant”); *Archibeque v. Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Ry. Co.*, 70 F.3d 1172, 1174 (10th Cir. 1995) (“[D]etermining the correct sanction is a fact specific inquiry that the district court is in the best position to make.”).

Factor 1: Degree of actual prejudice to Respondent. Prejudice may be inferred from delay, uncertainty, and rising attorney’s fees. *Faircloth v. Hickenlooper*, No. 18-1212, 2018 U.S. App. LEXIS 36450, at *5 (10th Cir. Dec. 26, 2018) (unpublished); *Jones v. Thompson*, 996 F.2d 261, 264 (10th Cir. 1993); see also *Auto-Owners Ins. Co. v. Summit Park Townhome Ass’n*, 886 F.3d 852, 860 (10th Cir. 2018) (concluding substantial prejudice when plaintiff “sparked months of litigation” and defendants “wasted eight months of litigation”); *Riviera Drilling & Exploration Co. v. Gunnison Energy Corp.*, 412 F. App’x 89, 93 (10th Cir. 2011) (unpublished) (approving district court’s observation that “delay would ‘prolong for the defendants the substantial uncertainty faced by all parties pending litigation’”) (citation omitted).

Reviewing the docket here, the Court concludes that Petitioner's neglect prejudices Respondent. Starting more than thirteen months ago--on May 3, 2018--when Respondent was ordered to answer, Respondent has defended this lawsuit in good faith. Respondent has adhered to the Court's order, (Doc. No. 12), to file an answer, (Doc. No. 14). The answer thoroughly recites the facts and law, analyzes the issues, and provides eleven relevant exhibits in support. (Id.) This apparently took Respondent considerable time and resources--and for naught as Petitioner has been unresponsive.

Respondent has wasted more than a year of litigation since first ordered to answer. To let the case proceed when Petitioner has not met his duties might make Respondent spend more unnecessary time and money to defend a case that Petitioner seems to have no interest in pursuing. This factor weighs toward dismissal. See *Kalkhorst v. Medtronic, Inc.*, No. 18-cv-580-KLM, 2018 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 215598, at *8 (D. Colo. Dec. 19, 2018); see also *Tolefree v. Amerigroup Kan., Inc.*, No. 18-2032-CM-TJJ, 2018 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 195448, at *5 (D. Kan. Nov. 15, 2018) (“Defendants have had plaintiff’s allegations pending in an open court case for nearly ten months, with no end in sight. Plaintiff, on the other hand, has shown little interest in pursuing her claims or following court orders.”); *Oliver v. Wiley*, No. 09-cv-441-PAB, 2010 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 92836, at *5 (D. Colo. Aug. 18, 2010) (“Applicant’s failure to provide the Court with a current address . . . and failure to keep abreast of his case has prejudiced Respondent, who was forced to answer an Application that Applicant appears to have no intention of pursuing. While arguably this prejudice is not ongoing, this factor weighs slightly in favor of dismissal.”).

Factor 2: Amount of interference with judicial process. In *Jones*, the Tenth Circuit concluded that the plaintiff had significantly interfered with the judicial process when he did not

answer a show-cause order or join a telephone conference. Jones, 996 F.2d at 265. Though Jones later argued that the district court could have abated the suit and revisited the status in three to six months, the court noted that abeyance would have delayed the proceedings for the other parties and the court. Id. The court said, “In similar circumstances, we have held that a district court could find interference with the judicial process when the plaintiff ‘repeatedly ignore[s] court orders and thereby hinder[s] the court’s management of its docket and its efforts to avoid unnecessary burdens on the court and the opposing party.’” Id. (citation omitted).

Meanwhile, in *Villecco*, the Tenth Circuit concluded that the plaintiff had “caused great interference with the judicial process by failing to provide the court with a current mailing address or an address that he regularly checked; respond to discovery requests; appear at his deposition; list any fact witnesses or otherwise comply with the court's Initial Pretrial Order, or respond to the Defendants' Motion to Dismiss.” *Villecco v. Vail Resorts, Inc.*, 707 F. App’x 531, 533 (10th Cir. 2017); see also *Banks v. Katzenmeyer*, 680 F. App’x 721, 724 (10th Cir. 2017) (unpublished) (“[H]e did not (1) respond to the order to show cause or (2) notify the court of his change of address as required by the local rules, even though his past actions show he was aware of the requirement.”); *Taylor v. Safeway, Inc.*, 116 F. App’x 976, 977 (10th Cir. 2004) (dismissing under *Ehrenhaus* when “judicial process essentially ground to a halt when [Plaintiff] refused to respond to either the defendant[s’ filings] or the district court’s orders”); *Killen v. Reed & Carnick*, No. 95-4196, 1997 U.S. App. LEXIS 430, at *4 (10th Cir. Jan. 9, 1997) (unpublished) (“Plaintiff’s willful failure to comply with [court] orders flouted the court’s authority and interfered with the judicial process.” (Internal quotation marks & citation omitted.)). “[F]ailure to respond to court orders cannot be ignored.” *Davis*, 571 F.3d at 1062.

Likewise here, this Court concludes Petitioner's failure to prosecute his case--i.e., failure to comply with Court orders--necessarily interferes with effective administration of justice. The issue here "is respect for the judicial process and the law." See *Cosby v. Meadors*, 351 F.3d 1324, 1326-27 (10th Cir. 2003); *Oliver v. Wiley*, No. 09-cv-441-PAB, 2010 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 92836, at *6 (D. Colo. Aug. 18, 2010) (holding petitioner's failure to comply with rules and order to show cause shows lack of respect for court, respondent, and judicial process, and concluding, if petitioner's case were not dismissed, court's merits review of petition would unnecessarily increase court's workload and interfere with justice administration). Petitioner's failure to put himself in a position to comply with court orders disrespects the Court and the judicial process. His neglect has caused the Court and staff to spend unnecessary time and effort. The Court's frequent review of the docket and preparation of orders to move this case along have increased the workload of the Court and hijacked its attention from other matters with parties who have met their obligations and deserve prompt resolution of their issues. "This order is a perfect example, demonstrating the substantial time and expense required to perform the legal research, analysis, and writing to craft this document." *Lynn v. Roberts*, No. 01-cv-3422-MLB, 2006 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 72562, at *7 (D. Kan. Oct. 4, 2006).

This factor weighs toward dismissal. See *Kalkhorst*, 2018 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 215598, at *8-9; see also *Estate of Strong v. City of Northglen*, No. 1:17-cv-1276-WJM-SKC, 2018 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 211095, at *10 (D. Colo. Dec. 14, 2018) (report & recommendation) ("It is hard to fathom how failing to respond to orders of the federal district court would not interfere with the judicial process." (Emphasis in original.)).

Factor 3: Litigant's culpability. Evidence of culpability may be drawn from Petitioner's failure to provide another updated address (if one exists) and to file a reply, as repeatedly ordered, to the State's answer. See *Villecco*, 707 F. App'x at 534 (10th Cir. 2017); see also *Faircloth*, 2018 U.S. App. 36450, at *6 (finding culpability when plaintiff "had been solely responsible for his failure to update his address, to respond to the show-cause order"); *Stanko v. Davis*, 335 F. App'x 744, 747 (10th Cir. 2009) (unpublished) ("For at least seven months, Stanko failed to follow this order. The district court ordered Stanko to show cause for this failure. Stanko made no effort to explain his failure regarding those seven months."); *Theede v. U.S. Dep't of Labor*, 172 F.3d 1262, 1265 (10th Cir. 1999) (holding plaintiff responsible for inability to receive court filings based on not notifying court of correct address).

Earlier here, Petitioner showed ability to file a petition on his own, respond to Court orders, and notify the Court of his location. (Doc. Nos. 3-6, 8, 11, 16 & 19.) Because his last communication was when he filed a change of address on October 24, 2018, it is clear that Petitioner was clearly aware of his responsibility to be in contact with the Court. (Doc. No. 19.) Still, more than seven months have now passed since Petitioner's last filing--with no further word at all. And Petitioner has not responded to either of the Court's orders to show cause, (Doc. Nos. 18 & 20), or notified the Court whether he has again changed his address. See *Banks*, 680 F. App'x at 724; see also *Oliver*, 2010 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 92836, at *6-7 ("Applicant has, without any reasonable excuse, ignored [his duty to tell the Court of any address change]. Applicant has also failed to show cause why his case should not be dismissed or provide any justification for his failure to prosecute his case. Although Applicant's pleadings are construed liberally because he is proceeding pro se, he is not excused from his obligations to follow the same rules of

procedure that govern other litigants. Therefore, the Court concludes that Applicant is culpable for his failure to follow the Local Rules and failure to litigate his case.” (Citation omitted.)).

This factor weighs in favor of dismissal.

Factor 4: Whether court warned noncomplying litigant that dismissal was likely sanction. In Faircloth, the court twice warned the plaintiff that failure to comply could result in dismissal. Faircloth, 2018 U.S. App. 36450, at *7. On appeal, when the plaintiff argued he did not get these warnings, the Tenth Circuit stated, “But he could have received the warnings had he complied with the local rule requiring him to update his address. Because he did not, the court's only option was to mail documents to him at his last known address. These mailings constituted effective service [under Fed. R. Civ. P. 5(b)(2)(C)].” Id; see also *O’Neil v. Burton Grp.*, 559 F. App’x 719, 722 (10th Cir. 2014) (unpublished) (supporting dismissal with prejudice for failure to appear especially after litigant had been warned repeatedly of consequences).

Here, the Court stated in its May 3, 2018 order, “Within thirty days after the answer and proposed order are filed by Respondent(s), Petitioner must file any objections.” (Doc. No. 12 (emphasis added).) And, in its October 3, 2018 and April 8, 2019 Orders to Show Cause, the Court warned that Petitioner “must within thirty days show cause why his petition should not be dismissed because he failed to reply to Respondent’s answer.” (Doc. Nos. 18 & 20.) There can be no mistaking the Court’s intentions.

Factor 5: Efficacy of lesser sanctions. Also in Faircloth, the district court had decided that no lesser sanction than dismissal could be effective when “[t]he court had been unable to receive a response from Mr. Faircloth and had no way of learning where Mr. Faircloth was or

when he would disclose his new address.” Faircloth, 2018 U.S. App. 36450, at *7-8. Due to this uncertainty, “the court reasonably concluded that dismissal was necessary.” Id.

Another case upheld dismissal when, “given [plaintiff’s] failure to communicate, to respond to any notices or the Motion to Dismiss, or to comply with any deadlines, the [district] court found no lesser sanction than dismissal would be effective.” Villecco, 707 F. App’x at 533. The court noted, “A lesser sanction would be ineffective because a stay would not have a ‘real impact on [Plaintiff] in encouraging responsiveness.’” Id. at 535; see also *O’Neil v. Burton Grp.*, 559 F. App’x 719, 722 (10th Cir. 2014) (unpublished) (“[S]imply because lesser sanctions were available does not mean that the court was obligated to apply them.”).

In yet another appeal, the Tenth Circuit stated that, though “dismissal should be imposed only after careful exercise of judicial discretion,” it

is an appropriate disposition against a party who disregards court orders and fails to proceed as required by court rules. . . . Dismissal of the [case] is a strong sanction to be sure, but it is no trifling matter for [a party] to abuse our office by disappearing and failing to meet our deadlines. The federal courts are not a playground for the petulant or absent-minded; our rules and orders exist, in part, to ensure that the administration of justice occurs in a manner that most efficiently utilizes limited judicial resources.

United States ex rel. Jimenez v. Health Net, Inc., 400 F.3d 853, 855, 856 (10th Cir. 2005).

It is true that, for a pro se party, “the court should carefully assess whether it might . . . impose some sanction other than dismissal, so that the party does not unknowingly lose its right of access to the courts because of a technical violation.” Ehrenhaus, 965 F.2d at 920 n.3; see also *Callahan v. Commun. Graphics, Inc.*, 657 F. App’x 739, 743 (10th Cir. 2016) (unpublished) (“The Court has been beyond lenient with Plaintiff throughout these proceedings based on his pro se status.”) (Citation omitted.)). On the other hand, “[m]onetary sanctions are meaningless

to a plaintiff who has been allowed to proceed in forma pauperis.” *Smith v. McKune*, 345 F. App’x 317, 320 (10th Cir. 2009) (unpublished); cf. *Riviera Drilling & Exploration Co. v. Gunnison Energy Corp.*, 412 F. App’x 89, 93 (10th Cir. 2011) (unpublished) (“Because Riviera had filed for bankruptcy, a financial sanction was out of the question.”).

Again, dismissal is a drastic sanction, but the Tenth Circuit has “repeatedly upheld dismissals in situations where the parties themselves neglected their cases or refused to obey court orders.” *Green v. Dorrell*, 969 F.2d 915, 917 (10th Cir. 1992). Dismissal is warranted when there is a persistent failure to prosecute the complaint. See *Meade v. Grubbs*, 841 F.2d 1512, 1518 n.6, 1521-22 (10th Cir. 1988).

Applying these principles here, the Court concludes that no sanction less than dismissal would be effective. First, though Petitioner is pro se, he is not excused of his neglect here. See *Green*, 969 F.2d at 917. Second, Petitioner has neglected this case long enough that the Court doubts monetary or evidentiary sanctions would be effective (even if such sanctions could be motivating for an indigent, pro se prisoner). This is because there is no way for the Court to even know whether Petitioner is receiving its orders. “It is apparent that Plaintiff is no longer interested in and/or capable of prosecuting his claims. Under these circumstances, no lesser sanction is warranted and dismissal is the appropriate result.” *Kalkhorst*, 2018 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 215598, at *12-13; see also *Oliver*, 2010 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 92836, at *7-8 (“[B]ased upon Applicant’s unknown location, the Court doubts that a monetary sanction would be practical or effective. Further, Applicant’s conduct impacts both the judicial system and Respondent jointly, and considering that Applicant has essentially neglected his case, the Court finds that no lesser sanction would be effective.”).

CONCLUSION

Having comprehensively analyzed the Ehrenhaus factors against the timeline and Petitioner's lack of responsiveness here, the Court concludes that dismissal is appropriate.

IT IS THEREFORE ORDERED that the petition is DISMISSED with prejudice. This action is CLOSED.

DATED this 4th day of June, 2019.

BY THE COURT:



CHIEF JUDGE ROBERT J. SHELBY
United States District Court