NONPRECEDENTIAL DISPOSITION
To be cited only in accordance with FED. R. APP. P. 32.1

United States Court of Appeals

For the Seventh Circuit
Chicago, Illinois 60604

Submitted February 24, 2025*
Decided February 25, 2025

Before

MICHAEL B. BRENNAN, *Circuit Judge*

AMY J. ST. EVE, *Circuit Judge*

DORIS L. PRYOR, *Circuit Judge*

No. 24-2132

SHEMICA TAYLOR,
Plaintiff-Appellant,

v.

CIRCUIT COURT OF COOK COUNTY, ILLINOIS, et al.,
Defendants-Appellees.

Appeal from the United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division.

No. 24 C 2604

Sara L. Ellis,
Judge.

O R D E R

Shemica Taylor was a party to a parentage and child-custody case concerning her daughter in the Circuit Court of Cook County, Illinois. She brought this action against several defendants, alleging that they violated her constitutional rights in the course of

* The appellees were not served with process and are not participating in this appeal. We have agreed to decide the case without oral argument because the brief and record adequately present the facts and legal arguments, and oral argument would not significantly aid the court. FED. R. APP. P. 34(a)(2)(C).

the family court proceedings. Taylor seeks damages and injunctive relief, including the reversal of the family court's allocation judgment (setting out each party's parenting responsibilities). The district court dismissed Taylor's suit, primarily for lack of subject-matter jurisdiction. Because, even to the extent we can exercise federal jurisdiction, Taylor's complaint does not state a claim, we affirm.

Taylor ended a long-term relationship with Robert Williams, the father of her child. Shortly thereafter, in May 2020, Williams began an action in the Circuit Court of Cook County for parentage and custody of their daughter. Throughout the proceedings, Taylor took issue with the actions and decisions of many of the participants in the case, including the presiding judges, a child representative, her attorneys, and Williams. Taylor sued these individuals, along with the Circuit Court of Cook County, in federal district court, primarily alleging violations of her constitutional rights. 42 U.S.C. § 1983.

Specifically, Taylor alleges that one judge, David Haracz, held a "trial by affidavit" and refused to allow the presentation of evidence, did not enforce his own orders, and entered an allocation judgment without knowledge of the facts. Michael Forti, a second judge, Taylor alleges, failed to investigate the facts, ignored her motions, and improperly refused to alter the allocation judgment. And according to Taylor, a child representative, Stacey Platt, approved falsified statements, made recommendations that were not in the best interest of Taylor's daughter, left out crucial information from her investigation, and mediated a session between Taylor and Williams in a biased manner.

Taylor further alleges that the attorneys who represented her in family court—Ashonta Rice, James Quigley, and James Hagler—violated her Sixth and Fourteenth Amendment rights. Taylor asserts that Rice failed to submit evidence and motions on Taylor's behalf, that Quigley charged her for work he did not complete and failed to address relevant issues, and that Hagler prevented her motions from being heard and worked with other court officials to obstruct her case.

And last, Taylor asserts that the Circuit Court of Cook County violated her rights with respect to how it treated her case file. When she obtained her file from the clerk's office, she discovered that the case summary was inaccurate, files were missing or misdated, and several documents were sealed without Taylor's prior knowledge. Taylor believes that someone tampered with her file in an attempt to conceal evidence.

The district court screened Taylor's complaint, *see* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2), and dismissed it for lack of subject-matter jurisdiction. The court determined that the

domestic-relations exception to federal subject-matter jurisdiction applied because the case implicated child-custody rights.[†] *See Alpern v. Lieb*, 38 F.3d 933, 934 (7th Cir. 1994). And the court explained that, even if it did have jurisdiction, Taylor did not overcome threshold obstacles: The circuit court judges were absolutely immune for acts performed in their judicial capacity, *see Dawson v. Newman*, 419 F.3d 656, 660–61 (7th Cir. 2005), Taylor had not alleged that the other individual defendants acted under color of state law, *see* 42 U.S.C. § 1983, and she had not included facts that would support a claim against the Circuit Court of Cook County under *Monell v. Department of Social Services of City of New York*, 436 U.S. 658 (1978). Taylor appeals, and we review the dismissal at screening de novo. *See Otis v. Demarasse*, 886 F.3d 639, 644 (7th Cir. 2018).

We lack jurisdiction over a substantial number of Taylor's claims. Taylor seeks, in part, to have the allocation judgment in her child custody case reversed or vacated, but the lower federal courts lack jurisdiction to do so. The *Rooker-Feldman* doctrine prevents federal courts from exercising jurisdiction over claims seeking the reversal of a state-court judgment, *see Gilbank v. Wood Cnty. Dep't of Hum. Servs.*, 111 F.4th 754, 766 (7th Cir. 2024), including in certain circumstances when the state court still can modify the judgment in an ongoing child-custody case, *see Hadzi-Tanovic v. Johnson*, 62 F.4th 394, 400 (7th Cir. 2023).

To the extent that Taylor seeks damages for violations of her constitutional rights during the proceedings, *see* 42 U.S.C. § 1983, those claims fall outside the *Rooker-Feldman* doctrine, *see Gilbank*, 111 F.4th at 792–93. But, as the district court concluded, the domestic-relations exception to federal jurisdiction blocks the adjudication of claims that turn on the application of family law. Federal courts do not interfere with cases involving "divorce, alimony, and child custody decrees." *Marshall v. Marshall*, 547 U.S. 293, 308 (2006) (quotation marks omitted). Resolving most of Taylor's claims against Williams, the judges, and the child representative would encroach on the state court's application of family law, and we therefore lack jurisdiction. *See Struck v. Cook Cnty. Pub. Guardian*, 508 F.3d 858, 860 (7th Cir. 2007).

[†] The court also invoked the Anti-Injunction Act, 28 U.S.C. § 2283, as a reason it could not interfere with the state court case. Taylor argues on appeal that the Act does not apply. She is correct that *Mitchum v. Foster*, 407 U.S. 225, 242–43 (1972), holds that 42 U.S.C. § 1983 authorizes anti-suit injunctions that do not offend principles of equity, comity, and federalism. We need not decide if this is such a suit because Taylor's claims all fail on other grounds.

As the district court explained, other threshold issues preclude Taylor's remaining claims. Judges Haracz and Forti have absolute immunity for acts performed in their judicial capacity. *Dawson*, 419 F.3d at 660–61. Taylor's claims concern their judicial decisions and how they conducted the family court proceedings, and they are therefore entitled to absolute immunity. *See Cooney v. Rossiter*, 583 F.3d 967, 969 (7th Cir. 2009). Platt, the child representative, is also entitled to absolute immunity. In custody cases, child representatives serve as "a hybrid of a child's attorney … and a child's guardian ad litem." *Id.* Taylor's claims concern the breadth and accuracy of Platt's investigation, her recommendations, and her alleged bias in mediation. Because this conduct occurred in the scope of Platt's court-appointed duties as a child representative, Platt is absolutely immune. *See Golden v. Helen Sigman & Assocs.*, 611 F.3d 356, 361 (7th Cir. 2010).

Taylor also does not state a claim against the Circuit Court of Cook County. In Illinois, circuit courts are part of the state judicial system, *see* ILL. CONST. art. VI, § 7(a), and so they are effectively the State of Illinois. A state is not a "person" subject to suit under § 1983. *See Will v. Mich. Dep't of State Police*, 491 U.S. 58, 64 (1989); *Thomas v. Illinois*, 697 F.3d 612, 613 (7th Cir. 2012).

Taylor's lawyers also have a statutory defense under § 1983 with respect to the claim that they violated the Sixth and Fourteenth Amendments. Only persons acting under color of state law can be liable under § 1983, but the lawyers are private parties. If they had agreed with a state official to deprive Taylor of her constitutional rights, they could be considered state actors. *See Cooney*, 583 F.3d at 970. In her complaint, Taylor alleged that one attorney "conspired with other court acting agents to obstruct justice," but she provided no further factual support for this conclusion or how she arrived at it. This "bare conclusion" is insufficient to support a claim against her attorneys under § 1983. *Id.* at 971.

What remains, when we construe the complaint liberally, are non-constitutional claims against Taylor's attorneys and Williams arising under state law. Taylor does not assert that there is federal jurisdiction based on diversity of citizenship, and it appears impossible based on the information in her complaint. *See Sykes v. Cook Inc.*, 72 F.4th 195, 205 (7th Cir. 2023) ("The party invoking federal jurisdiction bears the burden of establishing that it exists."). Therefore, the district court had only pendent jurisdiction over the state-law claims. 28 U.S.C. § 1367. And there is a presumption that a federal court will relinquish jurisdiction over state-law claims when it has dismissed all claims over which it had original jurisdiction. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 1367(c); *RWJ Mgmt. Co., v. BP*

Prods. N. Am., Inc., 672 F.3d 476, 479 (7th Cir. 2012). There are no factors here that weigh in favor of retaining supplemental jurisdiction, so it was appropriate to dismiss the state claims without prejudice, so they can be brought in state court.

AFFIRMED