

NONPRECEDENTIAL DISPOSITION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 June 20, 2025*

Decided June 24, 2025

Before

DAVID F. HAMILTON, *Circuit Judge*

MICHAEL Y. SCUDDER, *Circuit Judge*

CANDACE JACKSON-AKIWUMI, *Circuit Judge*

No. 24-2844

WILLIAM G. ROBERSON IV,
Plaintiff-Appellant,

v.

THOMAS J. DART,
Defendant-Appellee.

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

No. 24 C 2139

Jorge L. Alonso,
Judge.

ORDER

While a detainee at the Cook County Jail, William Roberson was required to attend a remote court hearing from a jail chapel. He sued Cook County Sheriff Thomas

* The appellee was not served with process and is 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).

Dart, alleging that this arrangement violated his rights under the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. *See* 42 U.S.C. § 1983. The district court screened the complaint and dismissed it for failure to state a claim. We affirm.

In March 2024, Roberson sued the Illinois Department of Corrections, Cook County, the State of Illinois, and the Chief Circuit Judge of Cook County, raising several issues related to his detention at the Cook County Jail in 2022. Roberson stated that he was required to attend a court hearing from a jail chapel, he injured his foot while exiting the chapel, he did not receive sentence credit to which he was entitled, and a court order related to some of his personal property was deficient.

The district court granted Roberson's motion to proceed in forma pauperis, screened the complaint, *see* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2), and dismissed it. The court explained that any claims against a judicial officer were barred based on absolute judicial immunity. The judge also dismissed any alleged state-law negligence claim. The court gave Roberson leave to file an amended complaint clarifying his allegations related to his court appearance from the jail chapel and reminded Roberson that he needed to identify a proper defendant.

Roberson filed an amended complaint against Cook County Sheriff Thomas Dart. Roberson alleged that on September 9, 2022, while he was detained at the Cook County Jail, a Sheriff's Deputy forced him to make a brief court appearance from a remote terminal in the jail's chapel. Roberson says that he was within 30 to 40 feet of a Christian altar, and religious iconography was prominently displayed. Roberson argued that this conduct violated his rights under the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

The district court screened the complaint again and concluded that Roberson failed to state a claim under the Establishment Clause. The court explained that Roberson did not allege that his presence in the chapel involved any proselytization or actual endorsement beyond the use of the facility for a secular purpose. The court also determined that Sheriff Dart was not a proper defendant. The complaint did not allege that Sheriff Dart was personally involved in the incident or that Roberson suffered a constitutional violation because of an official policy or widespread custom. The district court dismissed the complaint without leave to amend.

Roberson filed a motion to alter or amend the judgment, FED. R. CIV. P. 59(e), but the district court denied it. Among other things, the district court pointed out that

Roberson failed to address the court's conclusion that Roberson had failed to identify a proper defendant.

Roberson appeals. We review the district court's screening order de novo, drawing all reasonable inferences in Roberson's favor, and construing his allegations liberally. *Perez v. Fenoglio*, 792 F.3d 768, 776 (7th Cir. 2015).

Roberson argues that the district court improperly dismissed his amended complaint. He renews his argument that holding a remote court proceeding in a chapel and near Christian iconography constituted an impermissibly coercive government endorsement of religion. But we need not address this argument because we agree with the district court that Roberson failed to identify a proper defendant, a point that Roberson does not contest.

Under § 1983, a government official is liable only for his own misconduct. *Taylor v. Ways*, 999 F.3d 478, 493 (7th Cir. 2021). The amended complaint names only one defendant: Sheriff Dart. But the complaint is devoid of any allegations suggesting that Sheriff Dart was personally involved in the events of September 9. The body of Roberson's amended complaint states that an unnamed Sheriff's Deputy escorted him to the jail's chapel for a remote court hearing on one occasion in September 2022. The unidentified deputy is not a named defendant, and Roberson does not say that any other person was involved.

Moreover, Roberson cannot rely on a theory of *respondeat superior* liability. Instead, he must plausibly allege that Sheriff Dart himself violated the Constitution. See *Stockton v. Milwaukee County*, 44 F.4th 605, 619 (7th Cir. 2022). Supervisors may become personally involved in a subordinate's constitutional violation if they "know about the conduct and facilitate it, approve it, condone it, or turn a blind eye for fear of what they might see." *Taylor*, 999 F.3d at 494 (quoting *Matthews v. City of East St. Louis*, 675 F.3d 703, 708 (7th Cir. 2012)). But, as the district court recognized, Roberson makes no such allegations. Even construing his complaint liberally, Roberson does not allege that the chapel was used at Sheriff Dart's direction, with his knowledge, or as part of a recurring practice that Sheriff Dart deliberately ignored. Without such allegations, Roberson's § 1983 claim cannot proceed against Sheriff Dart on a theory of supervisory liability.

Finally, we agree with the district court that Roberson failed to articulate a plausible theory suggesting that Cook County had an official custom or policy that led

to any deprivation of his rights. A claim against Sheriff Dart in his official capacity is treated as a claim against Cook County itself. *Grieverson v. Anderson*, 538 F.3d 763, 771 (7th Cir. 2008). A governmental entity is not liable for the unconstitutional acts of its employees unless the acts were carried out pursuant to “an official policy, widespread custom, or deliberate act of a county decision-maker of the municipality or department.” *Id.* (quoting *Wagner v. Washington County*, 493 F.3d 833, 836 (7th Cir. 2007)); *see also Monell v. Dep’t of Soc. Servs.*, 436 U.S. 658, 694 (1978). Roberson’s allegation that he attended a court hearing from a jail chapel on one occasion does not permit a reasonable inference that the incident resulted from an official policy or widespread custom. *See Thomas v. Cook Cnty. Sheriff’s Dep’t*, 604 F.3d 293, 303 (7th Cir. 2010) (explaining that while there is no consensus on how frequently misconduct must happen to impose liability under *Monell*, “it must be more than one instance, or even three” (internal citation omitted)).

AFFIRMED