

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK

VINTON FROST,

Plaintiff,

-against-

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
HOMELAND SECURITY,

Defendant.

22-CV-2858 (LTS)

ORDER TO AMEND

LAURA TAYLOR SWAIN, Chief United States District Judge:

Plaintiff, who is appearing *pro se*, brings this action under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552. By order dated April 20, 2022, the Court granted Plaintiff's request to proceed *in forma pauperis* (IFP), that is, without prepayment of fees. For the reasons set forth below, the Court grants Plaintiff leave to file an amended complaint within 60 days of the date of this order.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

The Court must dismiss an IFP complaint, or any portion of the complaint, that is frivolous or malicious, fails to state a claim on which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B); *see Livingston v. Adirondack Beverage Co.*, 141 F.3d 434, 437 (2d Cir. 1998). The Court must also dismiss a complaint when the Court lacks subject matter jurisdiction of the claims raised. *See* Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(h)(3).

While the law mandates dismissal on any of these grounds, the Court is obliged to construe *pro se* pleadings liberally, *Harris v. Mills*, 572 F.3d 66, 72 (2d Cir. 2009), and interpret them to raise the “strongest [claims] that they suggest,” *Triestman v. Fed. Bureau of Prisons*, 470 F.3d 471, 474 (2d Cir. 2006) (internal quotation marks and citations omitted) (emphasis in

original). But the “special solicitude” in *pro se* cases, *id.* at 475 (citation omitted), has its limits – to state a claim, *pro se* pleadings still must comply with Rule 8 of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, which requires a complaint to make a short and plain statement showing that the pleader is entitled to relief.

The Supreme Court has held that, under Rule 8, a complaint must include enough facts to state a claim for relief “that is plausible on its face.” *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007). A claim is facially plausible if the plaintiff pleads enough factual detail to allow the Court to draw the inference that the defendant is liable for the alleged misconduct. In reviewing the complaint, the Court must accept all well-pleaded factual allegations as true. *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678-79 (2009). But it does not have to accept as true “[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action,” which are essentially just legal conclusions. *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555. After separating legal conclusions from well-pleaded factual allegations, the Court must determine whether those facts make it plausible – not merely possible – that the pleader is entitled to relief. *Id.*

BACKGROUND

The complaint sets forth the following allegations. On February 14, 2022, Plaintiff delivered a FOIA request to Alexandro Mayorkas, the Secretary of the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS), seeking “copies of all documents pertaining to [Plaintiff] in the custody of [DHS].” (ECF 2, at 3.) Plaintiff did not receive a response within 20 business days, and he seeks an order from this Court directing Defendant to respond to his document request.

DISCUSSION

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, provides members of the public a right of access to some information from federal executive agencies. Federal courts have jurisdiction to enforce this right if a requester can show that “an agency has (1) ‘improperly;’

(2) ‘withheld;’ (3) ‘agency records.’” *Kissinger v. Reporters Comm. for Freedom of the Press*, 445 U.S. 136, 150 (1980) (quoting 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(B)). “Unless each of these criteria is met, a district court lacks jurisdiction to devise remedies to force an agency to comply with the FOIA’s disclosure requirements.” *U.S. Dep’t of Justice v. Tax Analysts*, 492 U.S. 136, 142 (1989).

Before seeking judicial review, a FOIA applicant must exhaust administrative remedies by completing the administrative appeal process. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(A)(i)-(ii); *see Sloman v. U. S. Dep’t of Justice*, 832 F. Supp. 63, 65-66 (S.D.N.Y. 1993). The exhaustion requirement allows the targeted agency to correct its own errors, which obviates unnecessary judicial review. *See McKart v. United States*, 395 U.S. 185, 193-94 (1969); *New York Times Co. v. United States Dep’t of Labor*, 340 F. Supp. 2d 394, 398 (S.D.N.Y. 2004) (“[P]rior to judicial review, the [plaintiff] must exhaust h[is] administrative remedies.”).

The FOIA establishes the following administrative process:

Each agency, upon any request for records . . . shall (i) determine within 20 days (excepting Saturdays, Sundays, and legal public holidays) after the receipt of any such request whether to comply with such request and shall immediately notify the person making such request of – (I) such determination and the reasons therefor[.]

5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6)(A)(i); *see* 28 C.F.R. § 16.6(b), (c). If the request is denied, the requester may appeal the adverse determination to the head of the agency within 90 days. 5 U.S.C.

§ 552(a)(6)(A)(i)(III)(aa). A FOIA requester is deemed to have exhausted his administrative remedies if he files a timely appeal but the agency does not respond within applicable limits.

McKevitt v. Mueller, 689 F. Supp. 2d 661, 667 (S.D.N.Y. 2010) (relying on 5 U.S.C.

§ 552(a)(6)(C)(i)).

Here, Plaintiff does not provide facts suggesting that he filed an appeal to the head of the agency. Rather, he asserts that he submitted his FOIA request directly to the Secretary of DHS

and he did not receive a response within 20 days. Thus, this court cannot discern from the complaint whether Plaintiff exhausted his administrative remedies.

LEAVE TO AMEND

Plaintiff proceeds in this matter without the benefit of an attorney. District courts generally should grant a self-represented plaintiff an opportunity to amend a complaint to cure its defects, unless amendment would be futile. *See Hill v. Curcione*, 657 F.3d 116, 123-24 (2d Cir. 2011); *Salahuddin v. Cuomo*, 861 F.2d 40, 42 (2d Cir. 1988). Indeed, the Second Circuit has cautioned that district courts “should not dismiss [a *pro se* complaint] without granting leave to amend at least once when a liberal reading of the complaint gives any indication that a valid claim might be stated.” *Cuoco v. Moritsugu*, 222 F.3d 99, 112 (2d Cir. 2000) (quoting *Gomez v. USAA Fed. Sav. Bank*, 171 F.3d 794, 795 (2d Cir. 1999)). Because Plaintiff may be able to allege additional facts to state a valid FOIA claim, the Court grants Plaintiff 60 days’ leave to amend his complaint to detail his claims.

CONCLUSION

Plaintiff is granted leave to file an amended complaint that complies with the standards set forth above. Plaintiff must submit the amended complaint to this Court’s Pro Se Intake Unit within 60 days of the date of this order, caption the document as an “Amended Complaint,” and label the document with docket number 22-CV-2858 (LTS). An Amended Complaint form is attached to this order. No summons will issue at this time. If Plaintiff fails to comply within the time allowed, and he cannot show good cause to excuse such failure, the complaint will be dismissed for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted.

The Court certifies under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3) that any appeal from this order would not be taken in good faith, and therefore IFP status is denied for the purpose of an appeal. *Cf.*

Coppedge v. United States, 369 U.S. 438, 444-45 (1962) (holding that an appellant demonstrates good faith when he seeks review of a nonfrivolous issue).

SO ORDERED.

Dated: May 2, 2022
New York, New York

/s/ Laura Taylor Swain
LAURA TAYLOR SWAIN
Chief United States District Judge

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK

Write the full name of each plaintiff.

____ CV _____
(Include case number if one has been assigned)

-against-

AMENDED

COMPLAINT

Do you want a jury trial?

Yes No

Write the full name of each defendant. If you need more space, please write "see attached" in the space above and attach an additional sheet of paper with the full list of names. The names listed above must be identical to those contained in Section II.

NOTICE

The public can access electronic court files. For privacy and security reasons, papers filed with the court should therefore *not* contain: an individual's full social security number or full birth date; the full name of a person known to be a minor; or a complete financial account number. A filing may include *only*: the last four digits of a social security number; the year of an individual's birth; a minor's initials; and the last four digits of a financial account number. See Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 5.2.

I. BASIS FOR JURISDICTION

Federal courts are courts of limited jurisdiction (limited power). Generally, only two types of cases can be heard in federal court: cases involving a federal question and cases involving diversity of citizenship of the parties. Under 28 U.S.C. § 1331, a case arising under the United States Constitution or federal laws or treaties is a federal question case. Under 28 U.S.C. § 1332, a case in which a citizen of one State sues a citizen of another State or nation, and the amount in controversy is more than \$75,000, is a diversity case. In a diversity case, no defendant may be a citizen of the same State as any plaintiff.

What is the basis for federal-court jurisdiction in your case?

- Federal Question**
- Diversity of Citizenship**

A. If you checked Federal Question

Which of your federal constitutional or federal statutory rights have been violated?

B. If you checked Diversity of Citizenship

1. Citizenship of the parties

Of what State is each party a citizen?

The plaintiff, _____, is a citizen of the State of
(Plaintiff's name)

(State in which the person resides and intends to remain.)

or, if not lawfully admitted for permanent residence in the United States, a citizen or subject of the foreign state of

If more than one plaintiff is named in the complaint, attach additional pages providing information for each additional plaintiff.

If the defendant is an individual:

The defendant, _____, is a citizen of the State of
(Defendant's name)

or, if not lawfully admitted for permanent residence in the United States, a citizen or
subject of the foreign state of

If the defendant is a corporation:

The defendant, _____, is incorporated under the laws of
the State of _____

and has its principal place of business in the State of _____

or is incorporated under the laws of (foreign state) _____

and has its principal place of business in _____.

If more than one defendant is named in the complaint, attach additional pages providing
information for each additional defendant.

II. PARTIES

A. Plaintiff Information

Provide the following information for each plaintiff named in the complaint. Attach additional
pages if needed.

First Name Middle Initial Last Name

Street Address

County, City State Zip Code

Telephone Number Email Address (if available)

B. Defendant Information

To the best of your ability, provide addresses where each defendant may be served. If the correct information is not provided, it could delay or prevent service of the complaint on the defendant. Make sure that the defendants listed below are the same as those listed in the caption. Attach additional pages if needed.

Defendant 1:

| | | |
|---|-----------|----------|
| First Name | Last Name | |
| Current Job Title (or other identifying information) | | |
| Current Work Address (or other address where defendant may be served) | | |
| County, City | State | Zip Code |

Defendant 2:

| | | |
|---|-----------|----------|
| First Name | Last Name | |
| Current Job Title (or other identifying information) | | |
| Current Work Address (or other address where defendant may be served) | | |
| County, City | State | Zip Code |

Defendant 3:

| | | |
|---|-----------|----------|
| First Name | Last Name | |
| Current Job Title (or other identifying information) | | |
| Current Work Address (or other address where defendant may be served) | | |
| County, City | State | Zip Code |

Defendant 4:

| | | |
|---|-----------|----------|
| _____ | | |
| First Name | Last Name | |
| _____ | | |
| Current Job Title (or other identifying information) | | |
| _____ | | |
| Current Work Address (or other address where defendant may be served) | | |
| _____ | | |
| County, City | State | Zip Code |

III. STATEMENT OF CLAIM

Place(s) of occurrence: _____

Date(s) of occurrence: _____

FACTS:

State here briefly the FACTS that support your case. Describe what happened, how you were harmed, and what each defendant personally did or failed to do that harmed you. Attach additional pages if needed.

INJURIES:

If you were injured as a result of these actions, describe your injuries and what medical treatment, if any, you required and received.

IV. RELIEF

State briefly what money damages or other relief you want the court to order.

V. PLAINTIFF'S CERTIFICATION AND WARNINGS

By signing below, I certify to the best of my knowledge, information, and belief that: (1) the complaint is not being presented for an improper purpose (such as to harass, cause unnecessary delay, or needlessly increase the cost of litigation); (2) the claims are supported by existing law or by a nonfrivolous argument to change existing law; (3) the factual contentions have evidentiary support or, if specifically so identified, will likely have evidentiary support after a reasonable opportunity for further investigation or discovery; and (4) the complaint otherwise complies with the requirements of Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 11.

I agree to notify the Clerk's Office in writing of any changes to my mailing address. I understand that my failure to keep a current address on file with the Clerk's Office may result in the dismissal of my case.

Each Plaintiff must sign and date the complaint. Attach additional pages if necessary. If seeking to proceed without prepayment of fees, each plaintiff must also submit an IFP application.

| | | | |
|------------------|----------------|------------------------------|----------|
| Dated | | Plaintiff's Signature | |
| First Name | Middle Initial | Last Name | |
| Street Address | | | |
| County, City | | State | Zip Code |
| Telephone Number | | Email Address (if available) | |

I have read the Pro Se (Nonprisoner) Consent to Receive Documents Electronically:

Yes No

If you do consent to receive documents electronically, submit the completed form with your complaint. If you do not consent, please do not attach the form.