Cases



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ADA

Service Animals & Title II

Brenda Sears had a seizure disorder and required the assistance of a service animal, a dog named O'Neal. When Sears was required to testify as a witness in a criminal case, she took O'Neal with her to the County courthouse. The courthouse had a general policy against permitting animals on the premises. Sergeant Brown at the security checkpoint told Sears that dogs were not allowed in the courtroom. When Sears explained O'Neal was a service animal and that she had a seizure disorder, Brown stated she would need to obtain clearance from a judge. About 20 minutes later—the earliest possible time, according to Brown—he spoke with the judge's court officer. As it was almost lunch time, the judge said he would deal with the matter after lunch. Sears waited (standing, since there were no chairs), and was admitted to the courtroom an hour and 45 minutes after she arrived. Since the incident, the courthouse adopted a service animals policy and held training sessions for its staff.

In the meantime, Sears brought a Section 1983 claim for damages, alleging that the County and County staff violated Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Fourteenth Amendment's Due Process and Equal Protection clauses, and state law. Title II provides that "no qualified individual with a disability" was to be excluded, by reason of disability, from participation in or be denied the benefits of, services, programs, or activities of a public entity, or be subjected to discrimination by any such entity. Compensatory damages could be recovered under the ADA only if the plaintiff proved "intentional" discrimination. The defendants moved for summary judgment on all claims on the basis that there was no genuine dispute as to any material fact and they were entitled to judgment as a matter of law. The County argued that any failure by it to train its officers, including Brown, was not a specific act of intentional discrimination against Sears.

The ADA claim against Brown in his individual capacity was dismissed, since there was no individual liability under Title II. Further, Sears failed to show the County intentionally discriminated against her on account of her disability, rather than having some other benign or non-discriminatory motive, inasmuch as a failure to supervise was not a valid theory of recovery in an ADA case. Brown's conduct was not motivated by discriminatory intent but by a genuine bewilderment at how to handle service animals. On the Section 1983 claim—that Sears was deprived, without due process and equal protection of the laws, of her right to physically access the courthouse—the court ruled that the plaintiff showed neither an unconstitutional policy or custom, nor actionable failure to train or supervise its officers, on the part of the County. The County was entitled to judgment as a matter of law on the § 1983 claim. Likewise, summary judgment was proper on the § 1983 claim against Brown, and Brown was entitled to qualified immunity. Even assuming Brown's conduct violated Sears's constitutional rights, she could not show the violation involved a clearly established constitutional right of which a reasonable person would have known. Moreover, Sears failed to refer to case law or put forward "evidence to indicate that what [Sergeant Brown] did was objectively unreasonable in light of the clearly established constitutional rights." *Sears v. Bradley County Gov't*, No. 1:10-CV-207, 2011 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 110502 (E.D. Tenn. Sept. 26, 2011).

Civil Rights

Suicide After Release from Police Custody

Twenty-one-year-old Jason Coscia was arrested after he was involved in a one-car accident, and taken into custody. On the way to the police station, he told the officers he was going to kill himself—that he was going to throw himself in front of a train. In addition to his threats, at the station house, he tried licking an electrical outlet. The officers, accordingly, did not lock him in a cell but placed him in leg restraints, and followed an evaluation protocol that showed a high suicide risk. Jason was not examined by a doctor, however, as he was released on his own recognizance about six hours later, in the company of a friend. The next morning, some fourteen hours after being released, he killed himself by stepping in front of a train. His mother brought a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 claim based in Fourteenth Amendment violations against the police officers, their superiors, and the Town of Pembroke for failing to provide medical services to Jason while he was in police custody, as a consequence of which, she claimed, he killed himself.

The defendants argued that Jason did not die in police custody, and there was no due process liability for suicide after release. The issue in this case was the sufficiency of the complaint to state a due process claim resting on law established with sufficient clarity to apprise the defendants of the duty they were said to have breached: whether it raised "a right to relief above the speculative level on the assumption that [those] allegations [were] true." *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007). The district court decided that a liability claim had been pleaded adequately despite the non-custodial death because a causal relationship (in fact and law) had been plausibly stated between the failure to furnish medical care during the temporary custody, and the self-destructive act the next morning.

On appeal, the First Circuit reversed. The court made clear that the pleadings raised no claim that the treatment by the police gave rise to a suicidal inclination when none otherwise existed, and nothing in the complaint suggested that Jason's self-destructive tendency was intensified by state action, or that anything done or omitted by the police made him more dangerous to himself. The causation alleged was a "failure to prevent the consequence of his preexisting suicidal disposition, a failure to intervene in a way that would change him, or his circumstances, for the better in the period after his release." Although "principles of liability under Section 1983 borrow from the understanding of tort causation... we think the rationale for official responsibility under the Due Process Clause requires a limit on liability that stops short of the point that may be reached by fact causation analysis, and this accounts for our disagreement with the district court." Here, the claim of causation led "to a liability beyond what due process impose[d]." In the absence of a claim of a state-created or augmented risk, fourteen hours at liberty was "not reasonably compatible with any claim that normal sources of support were effectively blocked. So far as it appears from the complaint, when the police released the decedent they 'placed him in no worse position than that in which he would have been had they not acted at all...'" With the restoration of the detainee's liberty, "the legal chain of preventive (as distinct from state-created) causation must be taken to have ended." *Coscia v. Town of Pembroke, MA*, No. 10-1714, 2011 U.S. App. LEXIS 18933 (1st Cir. Sept. 14, 2011).

Provision of Services to the Homeless

"A Society Without a Name, For People Without A Home Millennium Future-Present" (ASWAN) was an unincorporated association made up of homeless and formerly homeless people that advocated for the rights of the homeless. On February 05, 2007, the Commonwealth of Virginia, the City of Richmond, and others began operating the Conrad Center, a facility located about two miles from downtown Richmond that provided services to the homeless. ASWAN alleged that the governments and other defendants conspired to establish the Conrad Center in a "remote" location to reduce the presence of homeless people in the downtown area; that they took various actions to pressure organizations that provided services to the homeless in the downtown to relocate to the Conrad Center; and that the defendants did this to make the homeless less visible to, and segregate them from, Richmond's downtown community. They alleged, further, that the efforts to make the homeless less visible had their roots in class, race, and disability prejudice because the public generally perceived and regarded homeless people as being disabled due to mental illness, alcoholism, and substance abuse.

On February 17, 2009, ASWAN sued pursuant to 42 U.S.C. §§ 1983 and 1985(3), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, and the Fair Housing Act (FHA). In response, all of the defendants filed motions to dismiss, arguing, among other things, that the conspiracy complaint failed to state a claim upon which relief could be granted, and that the claims were barred by the applicable statute of limitations. The district court agreed and dismissed.

On appeal, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit affirmed. A conspiracy claim under Section 1985(3) required the plaintiff to prove (1) a conspiracy of two or more persons, (2) motivated by a specific class-based, invidiously discriminatory animus to (3) deprive the plaintiff of the equal enjoyment of rights secured by the law to all, (4) and which resulted in injury to the plaintiff as (5) a consequence of an overt act committed by the defendants in connection with the conspiracy. The conspiracy claim here was "comprised almost entirely of conclusory allegations unsupported by concrete facts," and, therefore, not sufficient to state a claim.

On the ADA, § 1983, and equal protection claims and the limitations issue, the Fourth Circuit had not previously determined what limitation period governed ADA claims brought in Virginia. It ruled here that a one-year limitation period in the Virginia Disabilities Act applied to ADA claims. On the § 1983 and equal protection claims, the statute of limitations period for both was two years. These began to run when ASWAN knew or should have known of its purported injury stemming from the alleged conspiracy to relocate homeless services from downtown, and certainly by February 2007. Accordingly, ASWAN's suit, filed after the two-year period expired on February 05, 2009, was out of time. The fact that the Conrad Center was still located in the original location and continued to offer services to the homeless (including new services) did not amount to a continuing violation so as to extend the limitation period: rather, this amounted to the continuing effect of the original decision to locate away from the downtown.

Last, on the FHA claim and argument that the actual date of the provision of "intake services" (overnight shelters) extended the accrual date for the limitation, the court disagreed: this was not material because ASWAN knew or should have known that intake services were going to be shifted when the Center opened; moreover, intake services to sign up for overnight shelter were not covered "services" within the meaning of the FHA. The intake services were provided by Catholic Charities, a nonprofit organization, and not by any governmental unit. A *Soc'y Without a Name, for People Without a Home, Millennium Future-Present v. Virginia*, No. 10-1437, 2011 U.S. App. LEXIS 17689 (4th Cir. Aug. 24, 2011).

First Amendment

Access to Bus Advertising

The plaintiff, a coalition of public interest groups, embarked on a public education campaign to correct a misconception that in Pennsylvania, felons were not eligible to vote immediately upon release from prison. As part of this project, the coalition approached the Port Authority of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania (the Authority), to place an ad in city transit buses. The Port Authority refused on the basis that its written advertising policy prohibited "noncommercial" ads (and later, the

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