

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF NEW JERSEY**

Jose Garcia, Wesley K. Bell, Edward Bizzarro and
Richard Wright individually and on behalf of a
Class of others similarly situated

Plaintiffs,

v.

OCEAN COUNTY, THEODORE J. HUTLER JR.
both individually and in his official capacity as the
Warden of the Ocean County Correctional Facility
SANDRA MUELLER both individually and in her
official capacity as Chief of Corrections of the
Ocean County Correctional Facility,

Defendants.

Civil Action

**CLASS ACTION
COMPLAINT**

**JURY TRIAL
DEMANDED**

Plaintiffs, for their Complaint herein, allege the following on information and belief except as to the allegations concerning individual claims, which are asserted upon personal knowledge.

NATURE OF ACTION

1. Plaintiffs Jose Garcia, Wesley K. Bell, Edward Bizzarro and Richard Wright bring this class action individually, and on behalf of, as more particularly defined in paragraph 13 below, a class of all persons who were strip-searched at the Ocean County Correctional Facility (hereinafter OCCF) after being held on child support warrants or charged with non indictable offenses or traffic violations in contravention of their rights against unreasonable searches under the Fourth Amendment of the United States Constitution.

2. Plaintiffs seek monetary damages individually and for each member of the proposed class who have suffered from the wrongful actions of the Defendants described herein; a declaration that the Defendants' policies are unconstitutional; and, an injunction

precluding the Defendants from continuing to violate the rights of those placed in their custody or detention.

PARTIES

1. Plaintiff, Jose Garcia (“Garcia” or “Plaintiff”) is, and at all times relevant hereto has been, a resident of the State of New Jersey domiciled in Toms River New Jersey. On or about August 2007 Mr. Garcia was frisked and hand cuffed in his home for a child support warrant. Plaintiff was transported to the Ocean County Correctional Facility. Plaintiff was illegally strip searched upon his admission to OCCF.

2. Plaintiff, Wesley K. Bell (“Bell” or “Plaintiff”) is, and at all times relevant hereto has been, a resident of the State of New Jersey domiciled in Manahawkin New Jersey. On or about August 10, 2007 Mr. Bell was arrested in court for failing to execute an environmental protection agreement. Plaintiff was illegally strip searched upon his admission to OCCF.

3. Plaintiff, Edward Bizzarro (“Bizzarro” or “Plaintiff”) is, and at all times relevant hereto has been, a resident of the State of New Jersey domiciled in Manahawkin New Jersey. In or about September 2007 Mr. Bizzarro was arrested for failing to pay child support. Plaintiff was transported to the Ocean County Correctional Facility. Plaintiff was illegally strip searched upon his admission to OCCF.

4. Plaintiff, Richard Wright (“Wright” or “Plaintiff”) is, and at all times relevant hereto has been, a resident of the State of New Jersey domiciled in Toms River New Jersey. On or about October 1, 2007 Mr. Wright turned himself in on a warrant for child support. Plaintiff was illegally strip searched upon his admission to OCCF.

5. Defendant Ocean County (the “County”) is a county government organized and existing under the laws of New Jersey. At all times relevant hereto, the County,

acting through its Correctional Department, was responsible for the policies, practices, supervision, implementation and conduct of all matters pertaining to the Ocean County Correctional Department and was responsible for the appointment, training, supervision and conduct of all Ocean County Correctional Department's personnel, including those working in the Ocean County Correctional Facility. In addition, at all relevant times, the County was responsible for enforcing the rules of the Ocean County Correctional Department and for ensuring that Ocean County Correctional Department's employees obey the Constitution and the laws of the United States and New Jersey.

6. Defendant Theodore J. Hutler Jr. ("Warden Hutler") is the Warden of the Correctional Department and, as such, is a policy maker with respect to the treatment of pretrial and other detainees over which the Correctional Department exercises custodial or other control. Warden Hutler is made a Defendant in this action in both his individual and official capacities.

7. Defendant Sandra Mueller ("Chief Mueller") is the Chief of Corrections of Ocean County and, as such, is a policy maker with respect to the treatment of pretrial and other detainees over which the Correctional Department exercises custodial or other control. Chief Mueller is made a Defendant in this action in both her individual and official capacities.

8. Ocean County will be referred to as the "County Defendant".

9. Both Warden Hutler and Chief Mueller will be referred to as the "Policy Making Defendants".

JURISDICTION AND VENUE

10. This Court has jurisdiction over this action under the provisions of 28

U.S.C. §§1331, 1341 and 1343 because it was filed to obtain compensatory damages, punitive damages and injunctive relief for the deprivation, under color of state law, of the rights of citizens of the United States secured by the United States Constitution and by federal law pursuant to 42 U.S.C. §§1981 and 1983. This Court also has jurisdiction over this action under the provisions of 28 U.S.C. §2201, as it was filed to obtain declaratory relief relative to the Constitutionality of the policies of a local government.

11. Venue is proper under 28 U.S.C. §1391(e)(2) because the events giving rise to the Plaintiffs' claims and those of proposed class members occurred in this judicial district.

CLASS ACTION ALLEGATIONS

12. Plaintiffs bring this action pursuant to Rules 23(b)(1), 23(b)(2) and 23(b)(3) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure on behalf of Plaintiffs and a class of similarly situated individuals who were arrested for misdemeanors or other petty crimes or minor violations and who were unlawfully strip-searched upon their entry into the Correctional Department.

13. The Class that Plaintiffs seek to represent is defined as:

All persons who have been placed into custody of the Ocean County Correctional Facility after being charged with non-indictable offenses (such as disorderly persons offenses, traffic infractions and/or civil commitments) and were strip-searched upon their transfer and entry into the Ocean County Correctional Department. The Class period commences on or about November 28, 2005 and extends to the date on which the County Defendant is enjoined from, or otherwise ceases from, enforcing its unconstitutional policy, practice and custom of conducting strip-searches absent reasonable suspicion. Specifically excluded from the Class are Defendants and any and all of their respective affiliates, legal representatives, heirs, successors, employees or assignees.

14. This action may be brought and may properly be maintained as a class action under Federal law and satisfies the numerosity, commonality, typicality and adequacy requirements for maintaining a class action under Fed. R. Civ. P. 23(a).

15. The members of the Class are so numerous as to render joinder impracticable. There are, and have been, hundreds and probably thousands of people who have been arrested for misdemeanors, violations, traffic infractions, failing to make payment on outstanding traffic violations, failing to make payment on outstanding fines or other minor non-indictable crimes who were strip-searched under the circumstances described herein.

16. Joinder of all these individuals is impracticable because of the large number of Class members and the fact that Class members are likely dispersed over a large geographic area, with some members, residing outside of Ocean County and this Judicial District. Furthermore, many members of the Class are low-income persons, may not speak English, may not know of their rights and likely would have great difficulty in pursuing their rights individually.

17. Common questions of law and fact exist as to all members of the Class that predominate over any questions that affect only individual members of the Class. The predominant common questions of law and fact include, without limitation, the common and predominate question of whether the Defendants' written and/or *de facto* policies of strip-searching individuals who were charged with non-indictable charges or violations when transferred to and placed into the custody of the Correctional Department violate the Fourth and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution and whether such a written and/or *de facto* policy existed during the Class period.

18. Plaintiffs' claims are typical of the claims of the members of the Class. Plaintiffs and all members of the Class have sustained damages arising out of Defendants' course of conduct. The harms suffered by the Plaintiff are typical of the harms suffered by the Class.

19. The representative Plaintiffs have the requisite personal interest in the outcome of this action and will fairly and adequately protect the interests of the Class. Plaintiffs have no interests that are adverse to the interests of the members of the Class.

20. A class action is superior to other available methods for the fair and efficient adjudication of this controversy, since joinder of all of the individual members of the Class is impracticable given the large number of Class members and the fact that they are dispersed over a large geographic area. Furthermore, the expense and burden of individual litigation would make it difficult or impossible for individual members of the Class to redress these constitutional violations. The cost to the federal court system of adjudicating thousands of individual cases would be enormous. Individualized litigation would also magnify the delay and expense to all parties and the court system. By contrast, the conduct of this action as a class action in this District presents far fewer management difficulties, conserves the resources of the parties and the court system, and protects the rights of each member of the Class.

21. The named Plaintiffs have retained counsel with substantial experience and success in the prosecution of class action and civil rights litigation. Plaintiffs are being represented by Jonathan W. Cuneo, Charles J. LaDuca and Alexandra Warren of Cuneo Gilbert & LaDuca, LLP; Elmer Robert Keach, III, Esquire; Seth Lesser and Fran Rudich of the Locks Law Firm, PLLC and William Riback, Esquire. Plaintiff's counsel have the resources, expertise and experience to successfully prosecute this action against the Defendants. No conflict exists between the Plaintiffs and members of the Class, or between counsel and members of the Class.

22. Upon information and belief, there are no other actions pending to address the

Defendants' flagrant violation of the civil rights of detainees, even though the Defendants have maintained their illegal strip-search regimen for at least the past several years.

23. This action, in part, seeks declaratory and injunctive relief. As such, Plaintiffs seek class certification under Fed. R. Civ. P. 23(b)(2), in that all Class members were subject to the same policy requiring the illegal strip-searches of individuals charged with non-indictable offenses that were transported to and placed into the custody of the Correctional Department. In short, the County Defendant and the Policy Making Defendant acted on grounds generally applicable to all Class members.

24. In addition to, and in the alternative, Plaintiffs seek certification under Rule 23(b)(3) or seek partial certification under Fed. R. Civ. P. 23(c)(4).

FACTS

Facts Applicable to the Class Generally

25. The Fourth Amendment of the United States Constitution prohibits state officials, such as the Policy Making Defendants in this action and the employees they supervise, from performing strip searches of pre-trial detainees who have been charged with non-indictable offenses and civil commitments unless there is reasonable suspicion to believe that the arrestee is concealing a weapon or contraband.

26. Ocean County and the Policy Making Defendants have, nonetheless, instituted a written and/or *de facto* policy, custom or practice of strip-searching all individuals who enter the custody of the Correctional Facility regardless of the nature of their charged crime and without the presence of reasonable suspicion to believe that the individual was concealing a weapon or contraband.

27. Further, Ocean County, and the Policy Making Defendants have also instituted a written and/or *de facto* policy, custom or practice of conducting visual

inspection of detainees in a state of undress on all individuals who enter the custody of the Correctional Facility, regardless of the individual characteristics or the nature of their charged crime. For purposes of this Complaint, this practice is collectively referred to as "strip-searches."

28. Ocean County and the Policy Making Defendants know or should know, that they may not institute, enforce or permit enforcement of a policy or practice of conducting strip-searches without particularized, reasonable suspicion

29. The Defendants' written and/or *de facto* policy, practice and custom mandating blanket strip-searches of pre-trial non-indictable detainees and civil commitment has been promulgated, effectuated and/or enforced in bad faith and contrary to clearly established law.

30. Reasonable suspicion to conduct a strip-search may only emanate from the particular circumstances incident to the search, such as the nature of the crime charged, the particular characteristics of the arrestees, and/or the circumstances of the arrest. Ocean County and the Policy Making Defendant have promulgated, implemented, enforced, and/or failed to rectify a written and/or *de facto* policy, practice or custom of strip-searching all individuals placed into the custody of the Ocean County Correction Department without any requirement of reasonable suspicion in violation of the Fourth Amendment to the United States Constitution. This written and/or *de facto* policy made the strip-searching of pre-trial detainees routine; neither the nature of the offense charged, the characteristics of the arrestee, nor the circumstances of a particular arrest were relevant to the enforcement of the policy, practice and custom of routine strip-searches.

31. Pursuant to this written and/or *de facto* policy, each member of the Class,

including the named Plaintiffs were the victim of a routine strip-search upon their entry into the OCCF. These searches were conducted without inquiry into or establishment of reasonable suspicion, and in fact were not supported by reasonable suspicion. Strip-searches are conducted for individuals arrested for, among other innocuous offenses such as, unpaid parking tickets, traffic violations, outstanding traffic fines and other non-indictable offenses.

32. As a direct and proximate result of the unlawful strip-search conducted pursuant to this written and/or *de facto* policy, the victims of the unlawful strip-searches – each member of the Class, including the named Plaintiff – has suffered or will suffer psychological pain, humiliation, suffering and mental anguish.

Facts Applicable to the Named Plaintiffs

33. Plaintiffs' experiences are representative of the Class.

34. Plaintiff, Jose Garcia ("Garcia" or "Plaintiff") is, and at all times relevant hereto has been, a resident of the State of New Jersey domiciled in Toms River New Jersey. On or about August 2007 Mr. Garcia was frisked and hand cuffed in his home for a child support warrant. Plaintiff was transported to the Ocean County Correctional Facility through the Sally Port elevator. Plaintiff was then patted down by another officer and taken to a shower room accompanied by a correctional officer. Mr. Garcia was directed to take his clothes off and turn his socks inside out. The correctional office turned his clothes inside out and directed Plaintiff to lift his testicles. Mr. Garcia was made to turn around, bend over and spread his buttocks.

35. Plaintiff, Wesley K. Bell ("Bell" or "Plaintiff") is, and at all times relevant hereto has been, a resident of the State of New Jersey domiciled in Manahawkin New Jersey. On or about August 10, 2007 Mr. Bell was brought to the correctional facility for

civil contempt. Plaintiff was similarly illegally strip searched upon his admission to OCCF.

36. Plaintiff, Edward Bizzarro (“Bizzarro” or “Plaintiff”) is, and at all times relevant hereto has been, a resident of the State of New Jersey domiciled in Manahawkin New Jersey. In or about September 2007 Mr. Bizzarro was arrested for failing to pay child support. Plaintiff was transported to the Ocean County Correctional Facility. Plaintiff was similarly illegally strip searched upon his admission to OCCF.

37. Plaintiff, Richard Wright (“Wright” or “Plaintiff”) is, and at all times relevant hereto has been, a resident of the State of New Jersey domiciled in Toms River New Jersey. On or about October 1, 2007 Mr. Wright turned himself in on a warrant for child support. Plaintiff was similarly illegally strip searched upon his admission to OCCF.

CAUSES OF ACTION

AS AND FOR A FIRST CAUSE OF ACTION

Violation of Constitutional Rights Under Color of State Law --Unreasonable Search and Failure to Implement Municipal Policies To Avoid Constitutional Deprivations Under Color of State Law--

38. Plaintiffs incorporate by reference and reallege each and every allegation stated in paragraphs 1 through 37.

39. The Fourth Amendment of the United States Constitution protects citizens from unreasonable searches by law enforcement officers, and prohibits officers from conducting strip-searches of pre-trial detainees arrested for non-indictable offenses or violations absent some particularized suspicion that the individual in question has either contraband or weapons.

40. The actions of all Defendants as detailed above, violated Plaintiffs' and the Class' rights under the United States Constitution. Simply put, it was not objectively reasonable for Correctional Facility personnel to strip-search Plaintiffs and the members of the Class based on their arrests for non-indictable offenses. It was also not objectively reasonable for the Policy Making Defendants to order/direct Correctional Department personnel to conduct such searches or to have a policy or practice permitting such searches.

41. These strip-searches were conducted pursuant to the policy, custom or practice of Ocean County and the Policy Making Defendant. As such, these Defendants are directly liable for the damages of the Class.

42. Upon information and belief, Ocean County and the Policy Making Defendants are responsible for establishing the policies and procedures to be utilized in the operation of the Correctional Department and are responsible for the implementation of the strip-search policy questioned in this lawsuit.

43. Ocean County and the Policy Making Defendants knew that the above-described strip-search policy was illegal, and acted willfully, knowingly, and with specific intent to deprive Plaintiffs and the members of the Class of their Constitutional rights.

44. This conduct on the part of all Defendants represents a violation of 42 U.S.C. § 1983, given that their actions were undertaken under color of state law.

45. As a direct and proximate result of the unconstitutional acts described above, Plaintiffs and the Class have been irreparably injured and seek damages, as well as the declaratory and injunctive and relief set out immediately below in the Prayer for Relief.

DEMAND FOR PUNITIVE DAMAGES

46. The actions of the Defendants detailed herein are outrageous, in that they continue to propagate an illegal strip-search policy even though they know for a fact that their actions are unconstitutional.

47. It is clear that the Policy Making Defendants have no, or little, respect for the civil rights of individual citizens or for the rule of law. Consequently, an award of punitive damages is necessary to punish the Policy Making Defendants, and to send a message to them that the requirements of the United States Constitution also apply to government officials in Ocean County.

DEMAND FOR TRIAL BY JURY

48. The Plaintiffs hereby demand a trial by jury.

PRAYER FOR RELIEF

WHEREFORE, Plaintiffs individually and on behalf of a Class of others similarly situated, request that this Honorable Court grant them the following relief:

- A. An order certifying this action as a class action pursuant to Fed. R. Civ. P. 23 with Plaintiff as Class representative.
- B. A judgment against all Defendants, jointly and severally on Plaintiff's Cause of Action detailed herein, awarding Compensatory Damages to named Plaintiffs and each member of the proposed Class in an amount to be determined by a Jury and/or the Court on both an individual and a class wide basis.
- C. A judgment against the Policy Making Defendants, Theodore J. Hutler Jr. and Sandra Mueller on Plaintiffs' Cause of Action for punitive damages in an amount to be determined by a properly charged jury.

- D. A declaratory judgment against Ocean County and the policy making Defendants declaring their policy, practice and custom of strip searching all detainees entering the Correctional Department, regardless of the offense charged or suspicion of contraband, to be unconstitutional and improper.
- E. A preliminary and permanent injunction enjoining Defendant Ocean County and the Corrections Officers they supervise from continuing to strip search individuals charged with pre-trial non-indictable offenses absent particularized, reasonable suspicion that the arrestee subjected to the search is concealing weapons or other contraband.
- F. A monetary award for attorney's fees and the costs of this action, pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1988, Fed. R. Civ. P. 23 and the Court's inherent powers.
- G. Such other and further relief as the Court may deem just and proper.

Respectfully submitted by:

Dated: November 28, 2007
Camden, New Jersey

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