

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
COUNTY OF SUMTER

RECORDED
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JAMES J. CAMPBELL
CLERK OF COURT
SUMTER COUNTY, S.C.

IN THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS
THIRD JUDICIAL CIRCUIT
Case No.: 2015-CP-43-00033

David Johnson,

Plaintiff,

v.

Mark Keel, Director, South Carolina Law
Enforcement Division (SLED) and the
State of South Carolina,

Defendants.

**ORDER GRANTING SUMMARY
JUDGMENT**

CERTIFIED TRUE COPY
OF ORIGINAL FILED

James J. Campbell
DEPUTY CLERK OF COURT
SUMTER COUNTY
SOUTH CAROLINA

This matter came before me on October 26, 2015 on the Defendants' Motion for Summary Judgment. The Defendants were represented at the hearing by Adam L. Whitsett, Esquire, General Counsel to the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division.¹ The Plaintiff was represented by Charles T. Brooks, III, Esquire, of The Brooks Law Office, LLC. Based upon the arguments presented at the hearing and the applicable South Carolina law, I hereby GRANT the Defendants' Motion for Summary Judgment.

BACKGROUND

The Plaintiff was convicted of Criminal Sexual Conduct with a Minor 1st Degree in 1992. The Plaintiff was sentenced to twenty-six (26) years of incarceration for this offense. Upon the Plaintiff's release from incarceration, he was required and did in fact register as a sex offender pursuant to the South Carolina Sex Offender Registry Act, § 23-3-400 *et seq.* ("SORA"). See State v. Walls, 348 S.C. 26, 31, 558 S.E.2d 524, 526 (2002) (holding that SORA "is not so punitive in purpose or effect as to constitute a criminal penalty" and that "the Act does not violate the *ex post facto* clauses of the state or federal constitutions"); Hazel v. State, 377 S.C.

¹ The Defendants are additionally represented in this action by Assistant Attorney General Courtney Lowell and Assistant Attorney General Marcie Greene.

60, 64, 659 S.E.2d 137, 139 (2008) (holding that “the applicable [Sex Offender Registry] statute is the statute that existed at the time of respondent’s release from prison.”). The Plaintiff filed this present action in January of 2015 seeking for this Court to fashion equitable personal relief for the Plaintiff. The Defendants Answered the Complaint and filed the present Motion for Summary Judgment.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

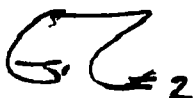
A motion for summary judgment shall be granted “if the pleadings... show that there is no *genuine* issue as to any *material* fact and that the moving party is entitled to a judgment as a matter of law.” George v. Fabri, 345 S.C. 440, 452, 548 S.E.2d 868, 874 (2001) *citing* Rule 56(c), SCRPC (emphasis in original).

“The purpose of summary judgment is to expedite disposition of cases which do not require the services of a fact finder.” Bankers Trust of South Carolina v. Benson, 267 S.C. 152, 155, 226 S.E.2d 703, 704 (1976).

LAW/ANALYSIS

Based on the following, there is no genuine issue of material fact in dispute in this matter. Further, there is no factual dispute requiring the services of a fact finder. Accordingly, Defendants are entitled to a judgment as a matter of law. *See* George v. Fabri, 345 S.C. 440, 452, 548 S.E.2d 868, 874 (2001); Rule 56(c), SCRPC

The Plaintiff was properly registered as a sex offender upon being released from incarceration in accordance with SORA. S.C. Code Ann. § 23-3-430(C)(4); State v. Walls, 348 S.C. 26, 31, 558 S.E.2d 524, 526 (2002) (holding South Carolina’s SORA “is not so punitive in purpose or effect as to constitute a criminal penalty” and that “the Act does not violate the *ex post facto* clauses of the state or federal constitutions”); Hazel v. State, 377 S.C. 60, 64, 659 S.E.2d 137, 139 (2008) (holding that “the applicable [SORA] statute is the statute that existed at



the time of respondent's release from prison." SORA is clear and unambiguous and mandates lifetime registration for all sex offenders in South Carolina. S.C. Code Ann. § 23-3-460 ("A person required to register pursuant to this article is required to register biannually for life").² SORA also provides the only lawful avenues by which individuals can be removed from the registry.³ See S.C. Code Ann. § 23-3-430(E), (F), (G). There is no genuine issue of material fact to suggest that Plaintiff meets any of these statutory criteria for removal from SORA. Accordingly, there is no legal basis for the Plaintiff to be removed from the registry and the Defendants are entitled to judgment as a matter of law. See S.C. Code Ann. § 23-3-460; S.C. Code Ann. § 23-3-430; Lozada v. South Carolina Law Enforcement Div., 395 S.C. 509, 512, 719 S.E.2d 258, 259 (2011)(acknowledging that "[w]hether an individual must be placed on the sex offender registry is a question of law.")

The Plaintiff's argument in this matter is that his constitutional SORA registration requirement constitutes a "wrong" that would justify this Court fashioning the Plaintiff an equitable personal remedy. This argument is without merit. The constitutional application of the clear and unambiguous provisions of SORA is not a "wrong" cognizable in South Carolina law. The South Carolina Supreme Court has held unequivocally that "the court's equitable powers must yield in the face of an unambiguously worded statute." Santee Cooper Resort, Inc. v. S. Carolina Pub. Serv. Comm'n, 298 S.C. 179, 185, 379 S.E.2d 119, 123 (1989). In addition, the South Carolina Supreme Court has also specifically held that,

[i]f a statute's language is plain, unambiguous, and conveys a clear meaning, the rules of statutory interpretation are not needed and the court has no right to impose another meaning." Buist v. Huggins, 367 S.C. 268, 276, 625 S.E.2d 636,

² I note that South Carolina law requires registration every ninety days for persons "classified as a Tier III offender by Title I of the federal Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006"; however, this registration is also "for life".

³ In fact, the mechanisms for both placement on and removal from the registry are provided by this same code section, S.C. Code § 23-3-430.

640 (2006) (internal quotes and citation omitted). Instead, the words of the statute must be given their plain and ordinary meaning without resorting to subtle or forced construction to limit or expand the statute's operation. *Id.* Moreover, "it is beyond this Court's power to effect a change in the statutes enacted by the Legislature." State v. Corey D., 339 S.C. 107, 120, 529 S.E.2d 20, 27 (2000); *see also* Keyserling v. Beasley, 322 S.C. 83, 86, 470 S.E.2d 100, 101 (1996) (this Court does "not sit as a superlegislature to second guess the wisdom or folly of decisions of the General Assembly").

Key Corporate Capital, Inc. v. County of Beaufort, 373 S.C. 55, 59, 644 S.E.2d 675 (2007).

Moreover, "[i]f a statute's language is plain and unambiguous, and conveys a clear and definite meaning, there is no occasion for employing rules of statutory interpretation and the court has no right to look for or impose another meaning." State v. Smith, 330 S.C. 237, 240, 498 S.E.2d 648, 650 (Ct.App. 1998). Accordingly, for this Court to fashion an equitable remedy outside of the clear and unambiguous provisions of SORA would exceed this Court's authority and this Court's equitable powers must yield to the clear and unambiguous language of SORA.

In addition, fashioning an equitable remedy in the face of the clear and unambiguous provisions of SORA would constitute a violation of the South Carolina Constitution's mandate for the separation of powers. *See* S.C. Const. art. I, § 8. The length of an individual's sex offender registration pursuant to SORA is solely a matter of legislative prerogative and there is no judicial discretion over such without violating the South Carolina Constitution. *Id.* This situation is comparable to legislatively mandated minimum or maximum sentences for criminal offenses. With regard to sentencing for an offense that has a mandatory minimum or maximum sentence, the South Carolina Legislature has unilaterally prohibited judges from sentencing individuals above or below the statutorily set amounts. However, these statutory sentence provisions are, and have been consistently upheld as being, lawful. *See* State v. De La Cruz, 302 S.C. 13, 393 S.E.2d 184 (1990); State v. Jones, 344 S.C. 48, 543 S.E.2d 541 (2001); State v.



Johnson, 350 S.C. 543, 567 S.E.2d 486 (Ct. App. 2002). In fact, the South Carolina Supreme Court conclusively resolved this issue in *State v. De La Cruz* indicating

[w]e have held in the past that “[t]he penalty assessed for a particular offense is, except in the rarest of cases, “purely a matter of legislative prerogative,” and the legislature’s judgment will not be disturbed.” State v. Smith, 275 S.C. 164, 167, 268 S.E.2d 276, 277 (1980) (quoting Rummel v. Estelle, 445 U.S. 263, 100 S.Ct. 1133, 63 L.Ed.2d 382 (1980)). Judicial discretion in sentencing, in suspending sentences, and in designating that sentences run concurrent or consecutive is subject to statutory restriction. See Mistretta v. United States, 488 U.S. 361, ---, 109 S.Ct. 647, 650, 102 L.Ed.2d 714, 725-726 (1989), wherein the United States Supreme Court noted, *16 “Congress, of course, has the power to fix the sentence for a federal crime, and the scope of judicial discretion with respect to a sentence is subject to congressional control.” (Citing United States v. Wiltberger, 18 U.S. (5 Wheat) 76, 5 L.Ed. 37 (1820); Ex Parte United States, 242 U.S. 27, 37 S.Ct. 72, 61 L.Ed. 129 (1916)).

302 S.C. 13, 15-16, 393 S.E.2d 184, 186 (1990).⁴ Similarly, the duration of an individual’s sex offender registration pursuant to SORA is purely a matter of legislative prerogative and there is no judicial discretion over this duration without violating the South Carolina Constitution and South Carolina law. S.C. Const. art. I, § 8; S.C. Code Ann. §23-3-430; S.C. Code Ann. § 23-3-460 (setting forth lifetime registration in South Carolina in an unambiguously worded statute).

Furthermore, the purely equitable relief sought by the Plaintiff in this matter is simply not available as a matter of law. The South Carolina Supreme Court has noted that “[e]quitable relief is generally available only where there is no adequate remedy at law” and that an “adequate legal remedy may be provided by statute.” Santee Cooper Resort, Inc. v. S.C. Pub. Serv. Comm’n, 298 S.C. 179, 185, 379 S.E.2d 119, 123 (1989) citing 27 *Am. Jur. 2d, Equity*, § 94 (1966) (emphasis added). The Santee Cooper Court further noted that an “adequate’ remedy at law is one which is as certain, practical, complete and efficient to attain the ends of justice and its administration as the remedy in equity.” *Id.* This does not however mean that the person

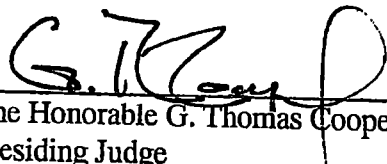
⁴ It is noteworthy that sex offender registration has been consistently held not to be “punitive in purpose or effect as to constitute a criminal penalty.” State v. Walls, 348 S.C. 26, 31, 558 S.E.2d 524, 526 (2002). However, the same sentiment would apply to an administrative requirement like registration in terms of the legislative prerogative.

seeking relief must be eligible for the relief set forth in the statute. Rather, it means only that some certain definitive statutory relief exists. Key Corporate Capital, Inc. v. County of Beaufort, 373 S.C. 55, 644 S.E.2d 675 (2007); Santee Cooper Resort, Inc. v. S.C. Pub. Serv. Comm'n, 298 S.C. 179, 185, 379 S.E.2d 119, 123 (1989). Ultimately, the Court in Santee Cooper noted that "the court's equitable powers must yield in the face of an unambiguously worded statute." Santee Cooper Resort, Inc. v. S. Carolina Pub. Serv. Comm'n, 298 S.C. 179, 185, 379 S.E.2d 119, 123 (1989). The statutory language of SORA providing for lifetime registration in South Carolina is unambiguously worded. See S.C. Code Ann. § 23-3-460 ("A person required to register pursuant to this article is required to register biannually for life.")⁵ Accordingly, this Court's equitable powers must yield to the clear and unambiguous language of SORA and there is no legal or constitutional basis for the Plaintiff to be removed from the registry.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, based on the foregoing and all applicable South Carolina law, it is hereby ORDERED, DECREED, and ADJUDGED that the Defendants' Motion for Summary Judgment is GRANTED.

AND IT IS SO ORDERED.


The Honorable G. Thomas Cooper
Presiding Judge
Court of Common Pleas
3rd Judicial Circuit

COLUMBIA, South Carolina
NOVEMBER 3, 2015

⁵ However, certain offenders must register every ninety days. S.C. Code Ann. § 23-3-460(B).

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
COUNTY OF SUMTER
IN THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS

RECORDED

JUDGMENT IN A CIVIL CASE
CASE NUMBER 2015CP4300033

David Johnson

2015 NOV -9 AM 9:34

Mark Keel

JAMES C. CAMPBELL
CLERK OF COURT
SUMTER COUNTY, S.C.

RECEIVED
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OF ORIGINAL FILED
NOV 16 2015
DEPUTY CLERK OF COURT
SC Court of Appeals

PLAINTIFF(S)

DEFENDANT(S)

Submitted by: Clerk of Court

Attorney for: Plaintiff Defendant
 Self-Represented Litigant

DISPOSITION TYPE (CHECK ONE)

- JURY VERDICT.** This action came before the court for a trial by jury. The issues have been tried and a verdict rendered.
- DECISION BY THE COURT.** This action came to trial or hearing before the court. The issues have been tried or heard and a decision rendered. See Page 2 for additional information.
- ACTION DISMISSED (CHECK REASON):** Rule 12(b), SCRPC; Rule 41(a), SCRPC (Vol. Nonsuit);
 Rule 43(k), SCRPC (Settled); Other: _____
- ACTION STRICKEN (CHECK REASON):** Rule 40(j) SCRPC; Bankruptcy;
 Binding arbitration, subject to right to restore to confirm, vacate or modify arbitration award; Other: _____
- DISPOSITION OF APPEAL TO THE CIRCUIT COURT (CHECK APPLICABLE BOX):**
 Affirmed; Reversed; Remanded; Other: _____

NOTE: ATTORNEYS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR NOTIFYING LOWER COURT, TRIBUNAL, OR ADMINISTRATIVE AGENCY OF THE CIRCUIT COURT RULING IN THIS APPEAL.

IT IS ORDERED AND ADJUDGED: See attached order; (formal order to follow) Statement of Judgment by the Court:

ORDER INFORMATION

This order ends does not end the case.

Additional Information for the Clerk: _____

INFORMATION FOR THE JUDGMENT INDEX

Complete this section below when the judgment affects title to real or personal property or if any amount should be enrolled. If there is no judgment information, indicate "N/A" in one of the boxes below.

Judgment in Favor of (List name(s) below)	Judgment Against (List name(s) below)	Judgment Amount To be Enrolled (List amount(s) below)

If applicable, describe the property, including tax map information and address, referenced in the order:

The judgment information above has been provided by the submitting party. Disputes concerning the amounts contained in this form may be addressed by way of motion pursuant to the SC Rules of Civil Procedure. Amounts to be computed such as interest or additional taxable costs not available at the time the form and final order are submitted to the judge may be provided to the clerk. Note: Title abstractors and researchers should refer to the official court order for judgment details.

Circuit Court Judge

2126

Judge Code

11/9/2015

Date

For Clerk of Court Office Use Only

This judgment was entered on , and a copy mailed first class or placed in the appropriate attorney's box on, to attorneys of record or to parties (when appearing pro se) as follows:

Charles Thomas Brooks III 309 Broad St. Sumter, SC
29150

Adam L Whitsett PO Box 21398 Columbia, SC 29221

ATTORNEY(S) FOR THE PLAINTIFF(S)

ATTORNEY(S) FOR THE DEFENDANT(S)

James C. Campbell

Court Reporter

James C. Campbell - Clerk of Court

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION REGARDING DECISION BY THE COURT AS REFERENCED ON PAGE 1.

This action came to trial or hearing before the court. The issues have been tried or heard and a decision rendered.

