

Because it appears from a review of the Petition that Petitioner is not entitled to issuance of the writ, the Court will dismiss the Petition without prejudice. See 28 U.S.C. § 2243.

I. BACKGROUND

Petitioner asserts that he was found not guilty, by reason of insanity, of charges tried in 2006 in the Superior Court of New Jersey, Trial Division, Somerset County. As a result of the verdict, he received psychiatric treatment on an outpatient basis until he refused to take his medication, at which time he was involuntarily committed for psychiatric treatment. Petitioner asserts that at a hearing on February 28, 2008, his treating psychiatrist testified that he should be released, but the court continued his commitment. Petitioner challenges his continued confinement pursuant to the February 28, 2008, commitment order.²

Petitioner asserts that he has not appealed the court order continuing his commitment because his attorney refused to file an appeal. (Petition, ¶ 12, Ground One, Ground Two, Ground Three; ¶ 13.) Alternatively, Petitioner asserts in Paragraph 15 of the Petition that he has an appeal now pending in the Superior Court of New Jersey, Appellate Division.

² This Court does not construe the Petition as challenging the 2006 verdict of not guilty by reason of insanity, from which Petitioner did not appeal, as Petitioner states that the verdict was consistent with his plea in the criminal matter. (Petition, ¶ 6.)

II. STANDARDS FOR A SUA SPONTE DISMISSAL

United States Code Title 28, Section 2243 provides in relevant part as follows:

A court, justice or judge entertaining an application for a writ of habeas corpus shall forthwith award the writ or issue an order directing the respondent to show cause why the writ should not be granted, unless it appears from the application that the applicant or person detained is not entitled thereto.

Similarly, Rule 4 of the Rules Governing Section 2254 Cases in the United States District Courts provides that, "[i]f it plainly appears from the petition and any attached exhibits that the petitioner is not entitled to relief in the district court, the judge must dismiss the petition

A pro se pleading is held to less stringent standards than more formal pleadings drafted by lawyers. Estelle v. Gamble, 429 U.S. 97, 106 (1976); Haines v. Kerner, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972). A pro se habeas petition and any supporting submissions must be construed liberally and with a measure of tolerance. See Royce v. Hahn, 151 F.3d 116, 118 (3d Cir. 1998); Lewis v. Attorney General, 878 F.2d 714, 721-22 (3d Cir. 1989); United States v. Brierley, 414 F.2d 552, 555 (3d Cir. 1969), cert. denied, 399 U.S. 912 (1970). Nevertheless, a federal district court can dismiss a habeas corpus petition if it appears from the face of the petition that the petitioner is not entitled to relief. See Lonchar v. Thomas, 517 U.S. 314, 320 (1996); Siers v. Ryan, 773

F.2d 37, 45 (3d Cir. 1985), cert. denied, 490 U.S. 1025 (1989).
See also 28 U.S.C. §§ 2243, 2254, 2255.

III. ANALYSIS

A state prisoner applying for a writ of habeas corpus in federal court must first “exhaust[] the remedies available in the courts of the State,” unless “there is an absence of available State corrective process[] or ... circumstances exist that render such process ineffective” 28 U.S.C. § 2254(b)(1). See also Rose v. Lundy, 455 U.S. 509, 515 (1982); Lambert v. Blackwell, 134 F.3d 506, 513 (3d Cir. 1997), cert. denied, 532 U.S. 919 (2001) (finding that “Supreme Court precedent and the AEDPA mandate that prior to determining the merits of [a] petition, [a court] must consider whether [petitioner] is required to present [his or her] unexhausted claims to the [state’s] courts”).

The exhaustion requirement is intended to allow state courts the first opportunity to pass upon federal constitutional claims, in furtherance of the policies of comity and federalism. Granberry v. Greer, 481 U.S. 129 (1987); Rose, 455 U.S. at 516-18. Exhaustion also has the practical effect of permitting development of a complete factual record in state court, to aid the federal courts in their review. Rose, 455 U.S. at 519.

A petitioner must exhaust state remedies by presenting his federal constitutional claims to each level of the state courts

empowered to hear those claims, either on direct appeal or in collateral post-conviction proceedings. See, e.g., O'Sullivan v. Boerckel, 526 U.S. 838 (1999) ("requiring state prisoners [in order to fully exhaust their claims] to file petitions for discretionary review when that review is part of the ordinary appellate review procedure in the State"); Ross v. Petsock, 868 F.2d 639 (3d Cir. 1989); 28 U.S.C. § 2254(c) ("An applicant shall not be deemed to have exhausted the remedies available in the courts of the State, within the meaning of this section, if he has the right under the law of the State to raise, by any available procedure, the question presented.") Once a petitioner's federal claims have been fairly presented to the state's highest court, the exhaustion requirement is satisfied. Picard v. Connor, 404 U.S. 270, 275 (1971); Castille v. Peoples, 489 U.S. 346, 350 (1989).

The petitioner generally bears the burden to prove all facts establishing exhaustion. Toulson v. Beyer, 987 F.2d 984, 987 (3d Cir. 1993). This means that the claims heard by the state courts must be the "substantial equivalent" of the claims asserted in the federal habeas petition. Picard, 404 U.S. at 275. Reliance on the same constitutional provision is not sufficient; the legal theory and factual predicate must also be the same. Id. at 277.

Here, although Petitioner alternately asserts that he has not appealed the commitment order because his counsel refused to

appeal, or that an appeal is pending, it is apparent that Petitioner had not, by March 20, 2008, the date of the Petition, exhausted his state remedies to challenge the commitment order entered three weeks earlier on February 28, 2008.

Further, Petitioner has neither asserted nor demonstrated an absence of available state process. Before exhaustion will be excused on this basis, "state law must clearly foreclose state court review of unexhausted claims." Toulson, 987 F.2d at 987. There does not appear to be any reason why Petitioner might be prohibited from exhausting his claims in state court.

As a matter of comity, it is best left to the New Jersey courts to determine if they can still entertain Petitioner's unexhausted claims. District courts should dismiss petitions containing unexhausted claims in the absence of a state court decision clearly precluding further relief, even if it is not likely that a state court will consider the claims on the merits. Banks v. Horn, 126 F.3d 206, 212-14 (3d Cir. 1997); see also Toulson, 987 F.2d at 989 ("Because no [New Jersey] court has concluded that petitioner is procedurally barred from raising his unexhausted claims and state law does not clearly require a finding of default, we hold that the district court should have dismissed the petition without prejudice for failure to exhaust state remedies"). Because no state court has concluded that Petitioner is procedurally barred from raising his unexhausted

claims, this Court is not prepared to presume that Petitioner's claims would be barred.

Alternatively, the Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has stated that, "if a prisoner could establish that the activities of the state authorities made the prisoner's resort to the state procedures in effect unavailable, exhaustion would be excused." Mayberry v. Petsock, 821 F.2d 179, 184 (3d Cir.), cert. denied, 484 U.S. 946 (1987). However, discovery and an evidentiary hearing should not be made available to a habeas petitioner who claims relief from the exhaustion rule "unless the petitioner sets forth facts with sufficient specificity that the district court may be able, by examination of the allegations and the response, if any, to determine if further proceedings are appropriate." Id. at 186. "[T]he allegations of exhaustion must be at least as specific with respect to the facts alledly excusing exhaustion as is required for allegations alleging constitutional deprivation as the basis for the habeas petition." Id. at 187.

Here, Plaintiff has made no allegation that the activities of state authorities make resort to state procedures, in effect, unavailable.

Accordingly, this Petition must be dismissed for failure to exhaust state remedies.

IV. CERTIFICATE OF APPEALABILITY

Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2253(c), unless a circuit justice or judge issues a certificate of appealability, an appeal may not be taken from a final order in a proceeding under 28 U.S.C. § 2254. A certificate of appealability may issue "only if the applicant has made a substantial showing of the denial of a constitutional right." 28 U.S.C. § 2253(c)(2). "A petitioner satisfies this standard by demonstrating that jurists of reason could disagree with the district court's resolution of his constitutional claims or that jurists could conclude the issues presented are adequate to deserve encouragement to proceed further." Miller-El v. Cockrell, 537 U.S. 322, 327 (2003). "When the district court denies a habeas petition on procedural grounds without reaching the prisoner's underlying constitutional claim, a COA should issue when the prisoner shows, at least, that jurists of reason would find it debatable whether the petition states a valid claim of the denial of a constitutional right and that jurists of reason would find it debatable whether the district court was correct in its procedural ruling." Slack v. McDaniel, 529 U.S. 473, 484 (2000).

Here, jurists of reason would not find it debatable whether this Court was correct in its procedural ruling. No certificate of appealability shall issue.

V. CONCLUSION

For the reasons set forth above, the Petition will be dismissed without prejudice for failure to exhaust state remedies. An appropriate order follows.

s/Freda L. Wolfson
Freda L. Wolfson
United States District Judge

Dated: April 3, 2008