

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF DELAWARE

OTTO GIBBS, :
 :
 Petitioner, :
 :
 v. : Civil Action No. 03-634-JJF
 :
 THOMAS CARROLL, :
 Warden, and M. JANE :
 BRADY, Attorney General :
 of the State of :
 Delaware, :
 :
 Respondents. :

Otto Gibbs, Pro Se Petitioner.

Thomas E. Brown, Deputy Attorney General, Delaware Department of
Justice, Wilmington, Delaware. Counsel for Respondents.

MEMORANDUM OPINION

June 17, 2004
Wilmington, Delaware

Farnan, District Judge

I. INTRODUCTION

Petitioner Otto Gibbs is a Delaware inmate in custody at the Delaware Correctional Center in Smyrna, Delaware. Currently before the Court is Petitioner's Petition For A Writ of Habeas Corpus pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2254 and his supporting Memorandum. (D.I. 2; D.I. 3) For the reasons that follow, the Court concludes that Petitioner's Petition is time-barred by the one-year period of limitations prescribed in 28 U.S.C. § 2244(d) (1).

II. BACKGROUND

On September 8, 1997, Petitioner was convicted by a Delaware Superior Court jury of second degree unlawful sexual intercourse. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison, suspended after 15 years for probation. The Delaware Supreme Court affirmed Petitioner's conviction and sentence on direct appeal. Gibbs v. State, 723 A.2d 396 (Del. 1998).

On September 24, 1999, Petitioner filed an application for state post-conviction relief pursuant to Superior Court Criminal Rule 61. The Delaware Superior Court denied post-conviction relief on January 7, 2002, and the Superior Court's denial was affirmed on appeal. Gibbs v. State, 804 A.2d 1066 (Del. 2002).

III. DISCUSSION

Petitioner's pro se Petition for federal habeas relief and

his supporting Memorandum assert the following nine ineffective assistance of counsel claims: (1) trial counsel did not investigate and review all relevant discoverable documents and failed to inform Petitioner about the legality of the State's DNA evidence; (2) trial counsel failed to conduct an independent DNA analysis and failed to hire an expert to review the victim's medical record; (3) trial counsel failed to research the law in support of an affirmative defense of consensual intercourse; (4) trial counsel improperly relied on an instruction of "voluntary social companion" status of the alleged victim to support an affirmative defense of consensual intercourse; (5) trial counsel misinterpreted Delaware's Rape Shield Laws, and as a result, he failed to investigate the victim's background of prior sexual history before trial; (6) trial counsel failed to object to the State's introduction and reliance on inadmissible photographic blood evidence through improper testimony of police officer; (7) trial counsel failed to cross-examine the police officer about the authenticity of photographic blood evidence; (8) trial counsel failed to object to the State's introduction of hearsay testimony from police party who testified in third party narrative; and (9) trial counsel failed to impeach any state witness' credibility on cross-examination. (D.I. 2; D.I. 3.)

Petitioner also asserts that the Superior Court unreasonably summarily denied his Rule 61 motion without an evidentiary

hearing. (D.I. 3 at J,K.)

On December 18, 2003, Petitioner filed a "Motion to Amend Habeas [Petition]," asking this Court to apply the "[a]ctual innocence, or miscarriage of justice, exception to any and all barred claims" in his Petition. (D.I. 18.) The Court granted this amendment. (D.I. 27.)

In their Answer, Respondents contend that the entire petition is time-barred and ask the Court to dismiss the petition as untimely. (D.I. 16.) Petitioner filed a Reply, asking the Court to view his trial counsel's alleged ineffective assistance as "good cause" to excuse his late filing. (D.I. 23.) Petitioner's habeas petition is now ripe for review.

A. One-Year Statute of Limitations

The Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 ("AEDPA") prescribes a one-year period of limitations for the filing of habeas petitions by state prisoners. 28 U.S.C. § 2244(d)(1). The one-year limitations period begins to run from the latest of:

(A) the date on which the judgment became final by the conclusion of direct review or the expiration of the time for seeking such review;

(B) the date on which the impediment to filing an application created by State action in violation of the Constitution or laws of the United States is removed, if the applicant was prevented from filing by such State action;

(C) the date on which the constitutional right asserted was initially recognized by the Supreme Court, if the right has been newly recognized by the Supreme Court and made

retroactively applicable to cases on collateral review; or

(D) the date on which the factual predicate of the claim or claims presented could have been discovered through the exercise of due diligence.

28 U.S.C. § 2244(d) (1).

Petitioner does not allege, nor can the court discern, any facts triggering the application of § 2244(d) (1) (B), (C), or (D). As such, the one-year period of limitations began to run when petitioner's conviction became final under § 2244(d) (1) (A).

Pursuant to § 2244(d) (1) (A), when a state prisoner appeals a state court judgment, the state court criminal judgment becomes "final," and the statute of limitations begins to run, "at the conclusion of review in the United States Supreme Court or when the [90-day] time [period] for seeking certiorari review expires." See Kapral v. United States, 166 F.3d 565, 575, 578 (3d Cir. 1999); Jones v. Morton, 195 F.3d 153, 158 (3d Cir. 1999). In the present case, the Delaware Supreme Court affirmed Petitioner's conviction and sentence on November 19, 1998. Consequently, Petitioner's conviction became final on February 17, 1999. Thus, pursuant to AEDPA's one-year limitations period, Petitioner needed to file his § 2254 Petition no later than February 17, 2000.

Petitioner's § 2254 Petition is dated July 8, 2003, and it was received by the Court on July 10, 2003. A pro se prisoner's habeas petition is deemed filed on the date he delivers it to

prison officials for mailing to the district court. Therefore, the Court adopts July 8, 2003 as the filing date. See Longenette v. Krusing, 322 F.3d 758, 761 (3d Cir. 2003) (the date on which a prisoner transmitted documents to prison authorities is to be considered the actual filing date); Woods v. Kearney, 215 F. Supp. 2d 458, 460 (D. Del. 2002).

Even with July 8, 2003 as the filing date, Petitioner filed his Petition more than 3 years too late. As such, his habeas Petition is time-barred and should be dismissed, unless the limitations period can be statutorily or equitably tolled. See Jones v. Morton, 195 F.3d 153, 158 (3d Cir. 1999). The Court will discuss each doctrine in turn.

B. Statutory Tolling

Section 2244(d) (2) of the AEDPA specifically permits the statutory tolling of the one-year period of limitations:

The time during which a properly filed application for State post-conviction or other collateral review with respect to the pertinent judgment or claim is pending should not be counted toward any period of limitation under this subsection.

28 U.S.C. § 2244(d) (2). The Third Circuit views a properly filed application for state post-conviction review as "one submitted according to the state's procedural requirements, such as the rules governing the time and place of filing." Lovasz v. Vaughn, 134 F.3d 146, 148 (3d Cir. 1998). However, a properly filed state post-conviction motion will only toll the federal habeas

limitations period if the post-conviction motion itself is filed within the federal one-year filing period. See Price v. Taylor, 2002 WL 31107363, at *2 (D. Del. Sept. 23, 2002).

Here, when Petitioner filed his state post-conviction motion, 217 days of AEDPA's limitations period had already expired. Petitioner's Rule 61 motion tolled AEDPA's limitations period until August 28, 2002, the date on which the Delaware Supreme Court affirmed the Superior Court's denial of the Rule 61 motion. See Swartz v. Meyers, 204 F.3d 417, 421-22 & n.5 (3d Cir. 2000). When AEDPA's limitations period began to run again on August 29, 2002, only 148 days were left in the one-year filing period. Consequently, Petitioner had to file his federal habeas Petition by January 24, 2003 to be timely. Petitioner, however, did not file his Petition until July 8, 2003. As such, the doctrine of statutory tolling does not render the Petition timely.

C. Equitable Tolling

A court, in its discretion, may equitably toll the one-year filing period when "the petitioner has in some extraordinary way . . . been prevented from asserting his or her rights." Miller v. New Jersey State Dep't of Corrs., 145 F.3d 616 (3d Cir. 1998) (internal citations omitted). In general, federal courts invoke the doctrine of equitable tolling "only sparingly." See United States v. Midgley, 142 F.3d 174, 179 (3d Cir. 1998). The

Third Circuit permits equitable tolling for habeas petitions in only four narrow circumstances:

- (1) where the defendant actively misled the plaintiff;
- (2) where the plaintiff was in some extraordinary way prevented from asserting his rights;
- (3) where the plaintiff timely asserted his rights mistakenly in the wrong forum; or
- (4) where [in a Title VII action] the claimant received inadequate notice of his right to file suit, a motion for appointment of counsel is pending, or the court misled the plaintiff into believing that he had done everything required of him.

Jones v. Morton, 195 F.3d 153, 159 (3d Cir. 1999).

Generally, "a statute of limitations should be tolled only in the rare situation where equitable tolling is demanded by sound legal principles as well as the interests of justice." Id. (quoting Midgley, 142 F.3d at 179). In order to trigger equitable tolling, the petitioner must demonstrate that he "exercised reasonable diligence in investigating and bringing [the] claims"; mere excusable neglect is insufficient. Miller, 145 F.3d at 618-19 (citations omitted).

Petitioner asserts his trial counsel's allegedly ineffective assistance as a reason to equitably toll the one-year limitations period. (D.I. 23.) Specifically, Petitioner argues that trial counsel informed him that he had "3 years to file a Rule 61 motion, then file Habeas among other options." Id.

As an initial matter, Petitioner's trial counsel correctly informed Petitioner that he had 3 years to file a state post-conviction motion under the state criminal procedural rules. See

Del. Super. Ct. Crim. R. 61(i)(1). Even if trial counsel erroneously told Petitioner that AEDPA's statute of limitations would not begin until after the 3 year limitations period for Rule 61 motions had expired, this mistake does not warrant equitably tolling. It is well-settled that inadequate research, attorney error, miscalculation, or other mistakes do not qualify as "extraordinary circumstances" sufficient to trigger equitable tolling. Fahy v. Horn, 240 F.3d 239, 244 (3d Cir. 2001). Additionally, if Petitioner misinterpreted trial counsel's statement, his failure to independently investigate AEDPA's limitations period constitutes excusable neglect insufficient to warrant equitable tolling.

Finally, Petitioner appears to assert his actual innocence as a reason for equitably tolling the one-year limitations period. (D.I. 18.) However, neither the Third Circuit Court of Appeals, nor the United States Supreme Court, has addressed whether a petitioner's "actual innocence" qualifies as an exception to AEDPA's statute of limitations. Morales v. Carroll, 2004 WL 1043723, at *3 (D. Del. Apr. 28, 2004); Devine v. Diguglielmo, 2004 WL 945156, at *3 & n.4 (E.D. Pa. Apr. 30, 2004) (collecting cases). Even if, arguendo, such an exception did exist, Petitioner's short conclusory request that he "would like the court to apply the actual innocence . . . exception to all barred claims" does not persuade the Court that he is

actually innocent. See Morales, 2004 WL 1043723, at *3 (discussing how a petitioner proves actual innocence). Accordingly, the Court concludes that the doctrine of equitable tolling is not available to Petitioner on the facts he has presented. Petitioner's § 2254 Petition will be dismissed as untimely.

IV. CERTIFICATE OF APPEALABILITY

Finally, the court must decide whether to issue a certificate of appealability. See Third Circuit Local Appellate Rule 22.2. A certificate of appealability may only be issued when a petitioner makes a "substantial showing of the denial of a constitutional right" by demonstrating "that reasonable jurists would find the district court's assessment of the constitutional claims debatable or wrong." 28 U.S.C. § 2253(c)(2); Slack v. McDaniel, 529 U.S. 473, 484 (2000).

When a federal court denies a habeas petition on procedural grounds without reaching the underlying constitutional claims, the court is not required to issue a certificate of appealability unless the petitioner demonstrates that jurists of reason would find it debatable: (1) whether the petition states a valid claim of the denial of a constitutional right; and (2) whether the court was correct in its procedural ruling. Id. "Where a plain procedural bar is present and the district court is correct to invoke it to dispose of the case, a reasonable jurist could not

conclude either that the district court erred in dismissing the petition or that the petitioner should be allowed to proceed further." Id.

The Court concludes that Petitioner's habeas Petition must be dismissed as untimely. Reasonable jurists would not find this conclusion to be unreasonable. Consequently, the Court declines to issue a certificate of appealability.

VI. CONCLUSION

For the reasons stated, Petitioner's Petition For A Writ Of Habeas Corpus Pursuant To 28 U.S.C. § 2254 is denied. An appropriate Order shall issue.

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 Respondents. :

ORDER

At Wilmington, this 17th day of June, 2004, consistent with the Memorandum Opinion issued this same day;

IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that:

1. Petitioner Otto Gibbs' Petition For A Writ Of Habeas Corpus Pursuant To 28 U.S.C. § 2254 is DISMISSED, and the relief requested therein is DENIED. (D.I. 2; D.I. 3.)

2. The Court declines to issue a certificate of appealability for failure to satisfy the standard set forth in 28 U.S.C. § 2253(c) (2).

JOSEPH J. FARNAN, JR.
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE