

**STATE OF MICHIGAN
MICHIGAN ADMINISTRATIVE HEARING SYSTEM
ADMINISTRATIVE HEARINGS FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES**

IN THE MATTER OF:

[REDACTED]

Reg. No.: 2011-49720
Issue No.: 2009
Case No.: [REDACTED]
Hearing Date: December 7, 2011
County: Oakland (63-03)

ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE: Robert J. Chavez

HEARING DECISION

This matter is before the undersigned Administrative Law Judge pursuant to MCL 400.9 and MCL 400.37 upon claimant's request for a hearing. After due notice, a hearing was held on February 16, 2012, at the Oakland County Department of Human Services (Department) office, District 03. Claimant was represented at hearing by [REDACTED]. The Department was represented by [REDACTED].

ISSUE

Was the denial of claimant's application for Medical Assistance (MA-P) and retroactive MA-P benefits for lack of disability correct?

FINDINGS OF FACT

The Administrative Law Judge, based upon the competent, material and substantial evidence on the whole record, finds as material fact:

1. Claimant applied for MA-P on June 22, 2009.
2. Claimant is 36 years old.
3. Claimant has a 12th grade education.
4. Claimant is not currently working.
5. Claimant has a work history consisting of store clerk and treatment specialist.

6. These jobs were worked at the light and sedentary levels and were skilled positions.
7. Claimant has a history of traumatic lumbar pain, posttraumatic middorsal spine precipitation and aggravation of hypertrophic changes, and precipitation and aggravation of disc space narrowing at C4-5, with associated hypertrophic changes and straightening of the cervical lordosis.
8. Claimant has a history of recurrent, constant pain in the back.
9. This pain is characterized by continuing daily headaches with a pain level of 6-8/10 and which last up to three hours in duration, shooting pain in the mid back area, shooting pains throughout both legs, and tightening in the mid back area.
10. Claimant testified that his current pain level was a 6-7/10.
11. Claimant's subjective complaints of pain are rationally supported by the objective medical testing.
12. Claimant's pain prevents claimant from concentrating on tasks, starting new tasks, and participating in work-related activities for an extended period of time.
13. Claimant only sleeps up to 4 hours per night due to pain, and has trouble concentrating because of lack of sleep.
14. Claimant currently medicates with several prescribed narcotic medications, including hydrocodone, vicodin, and flexeril.
15. Claimant was restricted from housework until at least March 2011.
16. Claimant testified to an inability to stand longer than 30 minutes and could not sit for longer than 30 minutes.
17. Claimant has been advised by treating sources to avoid lifting over 20 pounds.
18. On February 14, 2011, the Medical Review Team denied MA-P and retroactive MA-P, stating that claimant did not have a severe impairment.
19. On February 18, 2011, claimant was sent a notice of case action.
20. On May 16, 2011, claimant filed for hearing.
21. On October 12, 2011, the State Hearing Review Team (SHRT) denied MA-P and retroactive MA-P, stating that claimant did not have a severe impairment.
22. On December 7, 2011, a hearing was held before the Administrative Law Judge.

23. The record was held open for additional evidence. On April 11, 2012, SHRT again denied MA-P, stating that claimant could perform other work.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

The Medical Assistance (MA) program is established by Title XIX of the Social Security Act and is implemented by Title 42 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR). The Department administers the MA program pursuant to MCL 400.10, *et seq.*, and MCL 400.105. Department policies are found in the Bridges Administrative Manual (BAM), the Bridges Eligibility Manual (BEM) and the Bridges Reference Manual (BRM).

Federal regulations require that the Department use the same operative definition of the term "disabled" as is used by the Social Security Administration for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) under Title XVI of the Social Security Act. 42 CFR 435.540(a).

Disability is defined as the inability to do any substantial gainful activity (SGA) by reason of any medically determinable physical or mental impairment which can be expected to result in death or which has lasted or can be expected to last for a continuous period of not less than 12 months. 20 CFR 416.905.

This is determined by a five-step sequential evaluation process where current work activity, the severity and duration of the impairment(s), statutory listings of medical impairments, residual functional capacity, and vocational factors (i.e., age, education, and work experience) are considered. These factors are always considered in order according to the five-step sequential evaluation, and when a determination can be made at any step as to the claimant's disability status, no analysis of subsequent steps is necessary. 20 CFR 416.920.

The first step that must be considered is whether the claimant is still partaking in SGA. 20 CFR 416.920(b). To be considered disabled, a person must be unable to engage in SGA. A person who is earning more than a certain monthly amount (net of impairment-related work expenses) is ordinarily considered to be engaging in SGA. The amount of monthly earnings considered as SGA depends on the nature of a person's disability; the Social Security Act specifies a higher SGA amount for statutorily blind individuals and a lower SGA amount for non-blind individuals. Both SGA amounts increase with increases in the national average wage index. The monthly SGA amount for statutorily blind individuals for 2011 is \$1,640. For non-blind individuals, the monthly SGA amount for 2011 is \$1,000.

In the current case, the undersigned holds that the competent material evidence shows that claimant is not engaging in SGA and, therefore, passes the first step.

The second step that must be considered is whether or not the claimant has a severe impairment. 20 CFR 416.920(c). A severe impairment is an impairment expected to last 12 months or more (or result in death), which significantly limits an individual's physical

or mental ability to perform basic work activities. The term “basic work activities” means the abilities and aptitudes necessary to do most jobs. Examples of these include:

- (1) Physical functions such as walking, standing, sitting, lifting, pushing, pulling, reaching, carrying or handling;
- (2) Capacities for seeing, hearing, and speaking;
- (3) Understanding, carrying out, and remembering simple instructions;
- (4) Use of judgment;
- (5) Responding appropriately to supervision, co-workers and usual work situations; and
- (6) Dealing with changes in a routine work setting.

20 CFR 416.921(b).

The purpose of the second step in the sequential evaluation process is to screen out claims lacking in medical merit. *Higgs v. Bowen* 880 F2d 860, 862 (6th Cir, 1988). As a result, the Department may only screen out claims at this level which are “totally groundless” solely from a medical standpoint. This is a *de minimus* standard in the disability determination that the court may use only to disregard trifling matters. As a rule, any impairment that can reasonably be expected to significantly impair basic activities is enough to meet this standard.

In the current case, claimant has presented competent material evidence of a severe impairment that meets durational requirements. Claimant, therefore, passes the second step.

In the third step of the sequential evaluation, we must determine if the claimant’s impairment is listed in Appendix 1 of Subpart P of 20 CFR, Part 404. 20 CFR 416.925. This is, generally speaking, an objective standard; either the claimant’s impairment is listed in this appendix, or it is not. However, at this step, a ruling against the claimant does not direct a finding of “not disabled”; if the claimant’s impairment does not meet or equal a listing found in Appendix 1, the sequential evaluation process must continue on to step four.

The Administrative Law Judge finds that claimant’s medical records do not contain medical evidence of an impairment that meets or equals a listed impairment.

In making this determination, the undersigned has considered all applicable listings. Claimant has not provided evidence required to find disability at this step. The medical evidence presented does not support a finding of disability at this step.

Therefore, the claimant cannot be found to be disabled at this step, based upon medical evidence alone. 20 CFR 416.920(d). We must, thus, proceed to the next steps and evaluate claimant's vocational factors.

Evaluation under the disability regulations requires careful consideration of whether the claimant can do past relevant work (PRW), which is our step four, and if not, whether he can reasonably be expected to make vocational adjustments to other work, which is our step five. When the individual's residual functional capacity (RFC) precludes meeting the physical and mental demands of PRW, consideration of all facts of the case will lead to a finding that

- 1) The individual has the functional and vocational capacity for other work, considering the individual's age, education and work experience, and that jobs which the individual could perform exist in significant numbers in the national economy, or
- 2) The extent of work that the claimant can do, functionally and vocationally, is too narrow to sustain a finding of the ability to engage in SGA.

SSR 86-8.

Given that the severity of the impairment must be the basis for a finding of disability, steps four and five of the sequential evaluation process must begin with an assessment of the claimant's functional limitations and capacities. After the RFC assessment is made, we must determine whether the individual retains the capacity to perform PRW. Following that, an evaluation of the claimant's age, education and work experience and training will be made to determine if the claimant retains the capacity to participate in SGA.

RFC is an assessment of an individual's ability to do sustained work-related physical and mental activities in a work setting on a regular and continuing basis—meaning 8 hours a day, 5 days a week, or an equivalent work schedule. RFC assessments may only consider functional limitations and restrictions that result from a claimant's medically determinable impairment, including the impact from related symptoms. It is important to note that RFC is not a measure of the least an individual can do despite their limitations, but rather, the most. Furthermore, medical impairments and symptoms, including pain, are not intrinsically exertional or nonexertional; the functional limitations caused by medical impairments and symptoms are placed into the exertional and nonexertional categories. SSR 96-8p, 20 CFR 416.945 (a).

However, our RFC evaluations must necessarily differ between steps four and five. At step four of the evaluation process, RFC must not be expressed initially in terms of the step five exertional categories of "sedentary", "light", "medium", "heavy", and "very

heavy” work because the first consideration in step four is whether the claimant can do PRW as they actually performed it. Such exertional categories are useful to determine whether a claimant can perform at their PRW as is normally performed in the national economy, but this is generally not useful for a step four determination because particular occupations may not require all of the exertional and nonexertional demands necessary to do a full range of work at a given exertional level. SSR 96-8p.

Therefore, at this step, it is important to assess the claimant’s RFC on a function-by-function basis, based upon all the relevant evidence of an individual’s ability to do work-related activities. Only at step 5 can we consider the claimant’s exertional category.

An RFC assessment must be based on all relevant evidence in the case record, such as medical history, laboratory findings, the effects of treatments (including limitations or restrictions imposed by the mechanics of treatment), reports of daily activities, lay evidence, recorded observations, medical treating source statements, effects of symptoms (including pain) that are reasonably attributed to the impairment, and evidence from attempts to work. SSR 96-8p.

RFC assessments must also address both the remaining exertional and nonexertional capacities of the claimant. Exertional capacity addresses an individual’s limitations and restrictions of physical strength, and the claimant’s ability to perform everyday activities such as sitting, standing, walking, lifting, carrying, pushing and pulling; each activity must be considered separately. Nonexertional capacity considers all work-related limitations and restrictions that do not depend on an individual’s physical strength, such as the ability to stoop, climb, reach, handle, communicate and understand and remember instructions.

Symptoms, such as pain, are neither exertional nor nonexertional limitations; however, such symptoms can often affect the capacity to perform activities as contemplated above and, thus, can cause exertional or nonexertional limitations. SSR 96-8.

In the current case, claimant has presented competent material evidence that he is unable to perform past relevant work or has no past relevant work and, therefore, passes the fourth step.

In the fifth step of the sequential consideration of a disability claim, the Administrative Law Judge must determine if the claimant’s impairment(s) prevents claimant from doing other work. 20 CFR 416.920(f). This determination is based upon the claimant’s:

- (1) residual functional capacity defined simply as “what can you still do despite you limitations?” 20 CFR 416.945;
- (2) age, education, and work experience, 20 CFR 416.963-965; and

- (3) the kinds of work which exist in significant numbers in the national economy which the claimant could perform despite his/her limitations. 20 CFR 416.966.

See *Felton v DSS*, 161 Mich App 690, 696 (1987).

At step five, RFC must be expressed in terms of, or related to, the exertional categories when the adjudicator determines whether there is other work that the individual can do. However, in order for an individual to do a full range of work at a given exertional level, such as sedentary, the individual must be able to perform substantially all of the exertional and nonexertional functions required at that level. SSR 96-8p. The individual has the burden of proving that they are disabled and of raising any issue bearing on that determination or decision. SSR 86-8.

If the remaining physical and mental capacities are consistent with meeting the physical and mental demands of a significant number of jobs in the national economy, and the claimant has the vocational capabilities (considering age, education and past work experience) to make an adjustment to work different from that performed in the past, it shall be determined that the claimant is not disabled. However, if the claimant's physical, mental and vocational capacities do not allow the individual to adjust to work different from that performed in the past, it shall be determined at this step that the claimant is disabled. SSR 86-8.

For the purpose of determining the exertional requirements of work in the national economy, jobs are classified as "sedentary", "light", "medium", "heavy", and "very heavy". These terms have the same meaning as are used in the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*. In order to evaluate the claimant's skills and to help determine the existence in the national economy of work the claimant is able to do, occupations are classified as unskilled, semiskilled and skilled. SSR 86-8.

These aspects are tied together through use of the rules established in Appendix 2 to Subpart P of the regulations (*20 CR 404, Appendix 2 to Subpart P, Section 200-204, et seq.*) to make a determination as to disability. They reflect the analysis of the various vocational factors (i.e., age, education, and work experience) in combination with the individual's residual functional capacity (used to determine his or her maximum sustained work capability for sedentary, light, medium, heavy, or very heavy work) in evaluating the individual's ability to engage in SGA in other than his or her vocationally relevant past work. Where the findings of fact made with respect to a particular individual's vocational factors and residual functional capacity coincide with all of the criteria of a particular rule, the rule directs a conclusion as to whether the individual is or is not disabled. 20 CFR 404, Subpart P, Appendix 2, Rule 200.00(a).

In the application of the rules, the individual's RFC, age, education, and work experience must first be determined. The correct disability decision (i.e., on the issue of ability to engage in SGA) is found by then locating the individual's specific vocational profile. Since the rules are predicated on an individual's having an impairment which

manifests itself by limitations in meeting the strength requirements of jobs, they may not be fully applicable where the nature of an individual's impairment does not result in such limitations, e.g., certain mental, sensory, or skin impairments. 20 CFR 404, Subpart P, Appendix 2, Rule 200.00(c)-200.00(d).

In the evaluation of disability where the individual has solely a nonexertional type of impairment, determination as to whether disability exists shall be based on the principles in the appropriate sections of the regulations, giving consideration to the rules for specific case situations. The rules do not direct factual conclusions of disabled or not disabled for individuals with solely nonexertional types of impairments. 20 CFR 404, Subpart P, Appendix 2, Rule 200.00(e)(1).

However, where an individual has an impairment or combination of impairments resulting in both strength limitations and nonexertional limitations, the rules are considered in determining first whether a finding of disabled may be possible based on the strength limitations alone; if not, the rule(s) reflecting the individual's maximum residual strength capabilities, age, education, and work experience provide a framework for consideration of how much the individual's work capability is further diminished in terms of any types of jobs that would be contraindicated by the nonexertional limitations. Furthermore, when there are combinations of nonexertional and exertional limitations which cannot be wholly determined under the rules, full consideration must be given to all of the relevant facts in the case in accordance with the definitions and discussions of each factor in the appropriate sections of the regulations, which will provide insight into the adjudicative weight to be accorded each factor.

Claimant is 36 years old with a 12th grade education and a sedentary and light, skilled work history. The undersigned holds that the competent material evidence provided shows that claimant's exertional impairments render him able to perform work at the sedentary level.

That being said, even if claimant were able to perform work, physically, at the sedentary level, claimant's ability to *perform* work at the sedentary level in no way is a judgment of residual functional capacity. RFC is an assessment of an individual's ability to do **sustained** work-related physical and mental activities in a work setting on a regular and continuing basis—meaning 8 hours a day, 5 days a week, or an equivalent work schedule. The great weight of the evidence in the packet, including claimant's treating sources and claimant's own testimony, all indicate that this would be next to impossible for a person suffering from claimant's particularly disabilities. Claimant has subjective complaints of pain that have a rational basis in objective medical tests. Claimant's pain is such that claimant could not sustain a job; claimant experiences severe headaches, back spasms, and shooting pain that would severely interfere with work-related activities. Claimant's pain severely affects his ability to concentrate, and claimant's inability to sleep impairs his ability to hold a job. While claimant may be able to work at the sedentary level during high points in his impairment cycle, the Administrative Law Judge holds that there is no possible way claimant could ever sustain this employment.

Therefore, the Administrative Law Judge finds claimant highly credible and, in combination with testimony and medical records, finds that claimant cannot sustain sedentary employment.

Therefore, after careful review of claimant's medical records and the Administrative Law Judge's personal interaction with claimant at the hearing, this Administrative Law Judge finds that claimant's exertional and non-exertional impairments render him unable to engage in a full range of even sedentary work activities on a regular and continuing basis. 20 CFR 404, Subpart P, Appendix 2, Section 201.00(h). See Social Security Ruling 83-10; *Wilson v Heckler*, 743 F2d 216 (1986).

The Department has failed to provide vocational evidence which establishes that claimant has the RFC for SGA and that, given claimant's age, education, and work experience, there are significant numbers of jobs in the national economy which claimant could perform despite his limitations. Accordingly, this Administrative Law Judge concludes that claimant is disabled for the purposes of the MA program.

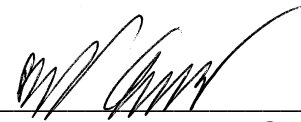
DECISION AND ORDER

The Administrative Law Judge, based upon the above findings of fact and conclusions of law, decides that claimant is disabled for the purposes of the MA program as of March 28, 2008. Therefore, the decision to deny claimant's application for MA-P was incorrect.

Accordingly, the Department's decision in the above-stated matter is, hereby, REVERSED.

The Department is ORDERED to:

1. Process claimant's MA-P application of June 22, 2009, and award all benefits that claimant is entitled to receive under the appropriate regulations;
2. Conduct a review of this case in June 2013.



Robert J. Chavez
Administrative Law Judge
for Maura Corrigan, Director
Department of Human Services

Date Signed: June 18, 2012

Date Mailed: June 19, 2012

NOTICE: Michigan Administrative Hearing System (MAHS) may order a rehearing or reconsideration on either its own motion or at the request of a party within 30 days of

the mailing date of this Decision and Order. MAHS will not order a rehearing or reconsideration on the Department's motion where the final decision cannot be implemented within 90 days of the filing of the original request. (60 days for FAP cases)

The Claimant may appeal the Decision and Order to Circuit Court within 30 days of the receipt of the Decision and Order or, if a timely request for rehearing was made, within 30 days of the receipt date of the rehearing decision.

Claimant may request a rehearing or reconsideration for the following reasons:

- A rehearing **MAY** be granted if there is newly discovered evidence that could affect the outcome of the original hearing decision.
- A reconsideration **MAY** be granted for any of the following reasons:
 - misapplication of manual policy or law in the hearing decision,
 - typographical errors, mathematical error, or other obvious errors in the hearing decision that effect the substantial rights of the claimant:
 - the failure of the ALJ to address other relevant issues in the hearing decision.

Request must be submitted through the local DHS office or directly to MAHS by mail at
Michigan Administrative Hearings
Reconsideration/Rehearing Request
P. O. Box 30639
Lansing, Michigan 48909-07322

RJC/pf

cc:

