

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

IN THE MATTER OF:

██████████
██████████
██████████

Reg. No.: 201428622
Issue No(s): 2009;4009
Case No.: ██████████
Hearing Date: May 7, 2014
County: Wayne (41)

ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE: Robert J. Chavez

HEARING DECISION

Following Claimant's request for a hearing, this matter is before the undersigned Administrative Law Judge pursuant to MCL 400.9 and 400.37; 42 CFR 431.200 to 431.250; and 45 CFR 205.10. After due notice, a telephone hearing was held on May 7, 2014, from Detroit, Michigan. Participants on behalf of Claimant included ██████████
██████████ Participants on behalf of the Department of Human Services (Department) included ██████████ Medical Contact Worker.

ISSUE

Whether the Department properly determined that Claimant was not disabled for purposes of the Medical Assistance (MA) and/or State Disability Assistance (SDA) benefit programs?

FINDINGS OF FACT

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

1. Claimant applied for MA-P and SDA on July 30, 2013.
2. Claimant is ██████ years old.
3. Claimant has a high school education.
4. Claimant is not currently working.
5. Claimant has a work history consisting of certified nursing assistant.

6. These jobs were worked at the medium exertional levels.
7. Job duties at these jobs included lifting weights of up to 50 pounds, standing up to 8 hours per day, and significant postural changes.
8. Claimant has a medical history of mechanical back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, and pain in the lower extremities.
9. An independent examination conducted on October 8, 2014 noted decreased range of motion in the spine, difficulty effecting postural changes, decreased sensation in the upper extremities, and severe pain in the feet.
10. A radiological exam conducted during the same exam noted degenerative spurs on the spine, plates in the feet, and degenerative spurs in the patella and tibial spine.
11. Claimant testified to difficulty walking or standing for great lengths of time, and said that an assistive device was necessary to ambulate.
12. On January 24, 2014, the Medical Review Team denied SDA, MA-P and retroactive MA-P, stating that Claimant did not meet durational requirements.
13. On January 30, 2014, Claimant was sent a notice of case action.
14. On February 20, 2014, Claimant filed for hearing.
15. On April 10, 2014, the State Hearing Review Team denied SDA and MA-P, stating that Claimant could perform other work.
16. On May 7, 2014, a hearing was held before the Administrative Law Judge.
17. The record was extended for additional medical evidence to confirm Claimant's need for an assistive device to ambulate, as well as other pain and residual functional capacity related issues.
18. The Department was ordered to secure these medical records; no records were ever submitted to the Administrative Law Judge.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

The Medical Assistance (MA) program is established by the Title XIX of the Social Security Act, 42 USC 1396-1396w-5, and is implemented by 42 CFR 400.200 to 1008.59. The Department of Human Services (formerly known as the Family Independence Agency) administers the MA program pursuant to MCL 400.10 and MCL 400.105.

The State Disability Assistance (SDA) program, which provides financial assistance for disabled persons, was established by 2004 PA 344. The Department administers the SDA program pursuant to MCL 400.10 *et seq.* and Mich Admin Code, Rules 400.3151 – 400.3180. Department policies are found in BAM, BEM, and RFT. A person is considered disabled for SDA purposes if the person has a physical or mental impairment which meets federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) disability standards for at least ninety days. Receipt of SSI benefits based on disability or blindness, or the receipt of MA benefits based on disability or blindness, automatically qualifies an individual as disabled for purposes of the SDA program.

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 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 are necessary. 20 CFR 416.920

It should be noted that the Department was ordered to secure medical records in order to make a determination as to whether Claimant required an assistive device to ambulate, as well as whether Claimant was experiencing other material pain issues, especially when standing or walking. No such evidence was ever secured or submitted to the undersigned. As such, when such information would be required or useful to the determination of the Administrative Law Judge, the undersigned will assume that the unsecured medical records would have contained information most beneficial to the Claimant; the unsecured medical records will also be assumed to have contained evidence that would have confirmed Claimant’s testimony.

The first step that must be considered is whether the Claimant is still partaking in Substantial Gainful Activity (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 2013 is \$1,740. For non-blind individuals, the monthly SGA amount for 2013 is \$1040.

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. 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. These symptoms have more than a *de minimus* effect on work related activities. 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. This is, generally speaking, an objective standard; either 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 the 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 they 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 to 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.

Symptom, such as pain, are neither exertional or 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 alleges disability due to back pain and carpal tunnel syndrome.

Independent examinations confirm that Claimant has reduced range of motion, and some difficulty with standing and walking for long periods of time. Claimant has difficulty with postural changes.

While this report is not a treating source opinion, it is consistent with the weight of the medical evidence, and the undersigned gives it full weight. The undersigned finds no reason to discount the opinion, as the opinion is consistent with objective medical reports, The opinion is also consistent with Claimant’s testimony. Finally, the

undersigned assumes that the unsecured medical records would have confirmed this examination.

From these reports, the Administrative Law Judge concludes that Claimant has a disabling impairment when considering the functions of walking, standing, carrying, reaching, grasping, lifting, pushing and pulling. Claimant has difficulties when manipulating fine objects. Claimant can not climb. Claimant has postural limitations, preventing them from crawling, stooping, and bending. Claimant has no visual limitations and no communicative (hearing, speaking) limitations. Claimant may not operate foot and leg controls. Claimant may not stand for extended periods of time.

Claimant's PRW includes work as a certified nursing assistant. These jobs, as typically performed and described by the Claimant involve standing for long periods, heavy lifting, and significant reaching, grasping, pushing and pulling, as well as significant postural changes.

Therefore, given the functional requirements as stated by Claimant (which is consistent with how these jobs are typically performed) for each of those jobs, and Claimant's functional limitations as described above, the Administrative Law Judge concludes that Claimant does not retain the capacity to perform their past relevant work.

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 substantial gainful activity 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 residual functional capacity, age, education, and work experience must first be determined. The correct disability decision (i.e., on the issue of ability to engage in substantial gainful activity) 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 55 years old (though 53 at time of application), with a high school education and a medium, skilled work history. The undersigned holds that Claimant's exertional impairments render Claimant able to perform work at the sedentary level, after considering Claimant's medical records, treating source statements, independent examinations and objective medical testing.

The undersigned finds Claimant's allegations of pain and decreased range of motion to be credible. As stated above, the independent examination opinion that Claimant is unable to stand or change posture without pain is given full weight. Claimant requires an assistive device to walk, and assumes that the unsecured medical records would have confirmed this.

There is no vocational evidence which establishes that the Claimant has the residual functional capacity for substantial gainful activity and that, given Claimant's age, education, and work experience, there are significant numbers of jobs in the national economy which the Claimant could perform despite Claimant's limitations.

Therefore, using a combination of Claimant's age, education level (which does not provide for direct entry into skilled work), and previous work experience, a finding of disability is directed. 20 CFR 404, Subpart P, Appendix 2, Rule 201.14. Claimant is disabled with an onset date of at least April 1, 2013. Therefore, the Department erred when it denied Claimant's Medicaid and SDA application for lack of disability.

As stated above, 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. As we are able to make a determination based solely on exertional limitations, an examination of Claimant's nonexertional limitations, such as pain, though quite relevant to Claimant's overall health, is not required and will not be made here.

The Administrative Law Judge, based on the above Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law, and for the reasons stated on the record, if any, finds Claimant disabled for purposes of the MA and/or SDA benefit program.

DECISION AND ORDER

Accordingly, the Department's determination is REVERSED.

THE DEPARTMENT IS ORDERED TO INITIATE THE FOLLOWING, IN ACCORDANCE WITH DEPARTMENT POLICY AND CONSISTENT WITH THIS HEARING DECISION, WITHIN 10 DAYS OF THE DATE OF MAILING OF THIS DECISION AND ORDER:

1. The Department is ORDERED to process Claimant's SDA and MA-P application of July 30, 2013 and award all benefits that Claimant is entitled to receive under the appropriate regulations.
2. The Department is ORDERED to conduct a review of this case in February, 2016.



Robert J. Chavez
Administrative Law Judge
for Nick Lyon, Interim Director
Department of Human Services

Date Signed: February 24, 2015

Date Mailed: February 24, 2015

NOTICE OF APPEAL: 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 or Reconsideration was made, within 30 days of the receipt date of the Decision and Order of Reconsideration or Rehearing Decision.

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).

A Request for Rehearing or Reconsideration may be granted when one of the following exists:

- Newly discovered evidence that existed at the time of the original hearing that could affect the outcome of the original hearing decision;
- Misapplication of manual policy or law in the hearing decision which led to a wrong conclusion;
- Typographical, mathematical or other obvious error in the hearing decision that affects the rights of the client;

- Failure of the ALJ to address in the hearing decision relevant issues raised in the hearing request.

The Department, AHR or the Claimant must specify all reasons for the request. MAHS will not review any response to a request for rehearing/reconsideration. A request must be *received* in MAHS within 30 days of the date the hearing decision is mailed.

The written request must be faxed to (517) 335-6088 and be labeled as follows:

Attention: MAHS Rehearing/Reconsideration Request

If submitted by mail, the written request must be addressed as follows:

Michigan Administrative Hearings
Reconsideration/Rehearing Request
P.O. Box 30639
Lansing, Michigan 48909-07322

RJC/tm

cc: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
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