

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
WESTERN DISTRICT OF ARKANSAS  
FORT SMITH DIVISION

DONNA WALLACE

PLAINTIFF

v.

CASE NO. 12-2249

CAROLYN W. COLVIN<sup>1</sup>, Commissioner  
of Social Security Administration

DEFENDANT

**MEMORANDUM OPINION**

Plaintiff brings this action under 42 U.S.C. § 405(g), seeking judicial review of a decision of the Commissioner of Social Security Administration (Commissioner) denying his claim for a period of disability and disability insurance benefits (DIB) and supplemental security income (“SSI”) under Title II of the Social Security Act (Act), 42 U.S.C. § 423(d)(1)(A). In this judicial review, the court must determine whether there is substantial evidence in the administrative record to support the Commissioner’s decision. *See* 42 U.S.C. § 405(g).

**I. Procedural Background:**

The plaintiff filed an applications for DIB on December 27, 2010 and SSI on July 2, 2010, alleging an onset date of April 29, 2010, due to plaintiff’s depression, inability to concentrate, DDD, scoliosis, and foot surgery (T. 158). Plaintiff’s applications were denied initially and on reconsideration. Plaintiff then requested an administrative hearing, which was held on October 31, 2011. Plaintiff was present and represented by counsel.

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<sup>1</sup>Carolyn W. Colvin became the Social Security Commissioner on February 14, 2013. Pursuant to Rule 25(d)(1) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, Carolyn W. Colvin has been substituted for Commissioner Michael J. Astrue as the defendant in this suit.

At the time of the administrative hearing, plaintiff was 42 years of age and possessed an 11<sup>th</sup> grade education. The Plaintiff had past relevant work (“PRW”) experience as a cashier, housekeeper, and laborer (T. 159).

On November 4, 2011, the Administrative Law Judge (“ALJ”) concluded that, although severe, plaintiff’s mood disorder, personality disorder, and back disorder did not meet or equal any Appendix 1 listing. T.16 . The ALJ found that plaintiff maintained the residual functional capacity (“RFC”) to perform light work with additional limitations. T. 17. With the assistance of a vocational expert, the ALJ then determined Plaintiff could perform the requirements of representative occupation such as sedentary unskilled assemblers and production worker and sedentary unskilled inspector/examiner. T. 22.

## **II. Applicable Law:**

This court's role is to determine whether the Commissioner's findings are supported by substantial evidence on the record as a whole. *Cox v. Astrue*, 495 F.3d 614, 617 (8th Cir. 2007). Substantial evidence is less than a preponderance, but enough that a reasonable mind would find it adequate to support the Commissioner’s decision. *Id.* “Our review extends beyond examining the record to find substantial evidence in support of the ALJ’s decision; we also consider evidence in the record that fairly detracts from that decision.” *Id.* As long as there is substantial evidence in the record to support the Commissioner’s decision, the court may not reverse the decision simply because substantial evidence exists in the record to support a contrary outcome, or because the court would have decided the case differently. *Haley v. Massanari*, 258 F.3d 742, 747 (8th Cir. 2001). If the court finds it possible “to draw two inconsistent positions from the evidence, and one of those positions represents the Secretary’s findings, the court must affirm the

decision of the Secretary.” *Cox*, 495 F.3d at 617 (internal quotation and alteration omitted).

It is well-established that a claimant for Social Security disability benefits has the burden of proving his disability by establishing a physical or mental disability that has lasted at least one year and that prevents him from engaging in any substantial gainful activity. *Pearsall v. Massanari*, 274 F.3d 1211, 1217 (8th Cir. 2001); *see* 42 U.S.C. § 423(d)(1)(A), 1382c(a)(3)(A). The Act defines “physical or mental impairment” as “an impairment that results from anatomical, physiological, or psychological abnormalities which are demonstrable by medically acceptable clinical and laboratory diagnostic techniques.” 42 U.S.C. § § 423(d)(3), 1382(3)(c). A plaintiff must show that his disability, not simply his impairment, has lasted for at least twelve consecutive months. *Titus v. Sullivan*, 4 F.3d 590, 594 (8th Cir. 1993).

The Commissioner’s regulations require him to apply a five-step sequential evaluation process to each claim for disability benefits. *See* 20 C.F.R. § § 404.1520(a)- (f)(2003). Only if the final stage is reached does the fact finder consider the plaintiff’s age, education, and work experience in light of his or her residual functional capacity. *See McCoy v. Schweiker*, 683 F.2d 1138, 1141-42 (8th Cir. 1982); 20 C .F.R. § § 404.1520, 416.920 (2003).

### **III. Discussion:**

The court has reviewed the Briefs filed by the Parties, the Transcript of the proceedings before the Commission, including a review of the hearing before the ALJ, the medical records, and relevant administrative records and finds the ALJ's decision is supported by substantial evidence.

#### **A. Step Two:**

Step two of the regulations involves a determination, based on the medical evidence,

whether the claimant has an impairment or combination of impairments that significantly limits the claimant's ability to perform basic work activities. See 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(ii), 416.920(a)(4)(ii). At step two of the sequential evaluation process, the claimant bears the burden of proving that he has a severe impairment. *Nguyen v. Chater*, 75 F.3d 429, 430-431 (8th Cir. 1996). An impairment or combination of impairments is not severe if there is no more than a minimal effect on the claimant's ability to work. *See, e.g., Nguyen*, 75 F.3d at 431. A slight abnormality (or a combination of slight abnormalities) that has no more than a minimal effect on the ability to do basic work activities is not a severe impairment. SSR 96-3p, 1996 WL 374181 (1996); SSR 85-28, 1985 WL 56856 (1985). If the claimant is not suffering a severe impairment, he is not eligible for disability insurance benefits. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1520(c).

Plaintiff attempts to establish that her alleged foot problem was a severe impairment based on her subjective complaints and the new evidence that she provided to the Appeals Council, which was dated two years or more before the alleged onset date. *See* Pl.'s Br. at 12-13. The Appeals Council considered the new evidence but found that it did not provide any basis for changing the ALJ's decision (Tr. 1-5) and the court agrees. There is no evidence in the record to establish the Plaintiff "foot problem" to be severe.

**B. RFC:**

RFC is the most a person can do despite that person's limitations. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1545(a)(1). It is defined as the individual's maximum remaining ability to do sustained work activity in an ordinary work setting "on a regular and continuing basis." 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1545 and 416.945; Social Security Ruling (SSR) 96-8p (1996). It is assessed using all relevant evidence in the record. *Id.* This includes medical records, observations of treating

physicians and others, and the claimant's own descriptions of her limitations. *Guilliams v. Barnhart*, 393 F.3d 798, 801 (8th Cir. 2005); *Eichelberger v. Barnhart*, 390 F.3d 584, 591 (8th Cir. 2004). Limitations resulting from symptoms such as pain are also factored into the assessment. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1545(a)(3). The United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit has held that a "claimant's residual functional capacity is a medical question." *Lauer v. Apfel*, 245 F.3d 700, 704 (8th Cir. 2001). Therefore, an ALJ's determination concerning a claimant's RFC must be supported by medical evidence that addresses the claimant's ability to function in the workplace." *Lewis v. Barnhart*, 353 F.3d 642, 646 (8th Cir. 2003).

Nevertheless, in evaluating a claimant's RFC, an ALJ is not limited to considering medical evidence exclusively. *Cox v. Astrue*, 495 F. 3d 614 at 619 *citing Lauer v. Apfel*, 245 F.3d 700 at 704; *Dykes v. Apfel*, 223 F.3d 865, 866 (8th Cir.2000) (per curiam) ("To the extent [claimant] is arguing that residual functional capacity may be proved only by medical evidence, we disagree."). Even though the RFC assessment draws from medical sources for support, it is ultimately an administrative determination reserved to the Commissioner.\*620 20 C.F.R. §§ 416.927(e)(2), 416.946 (2006).

### **1. Credibility:**

In determining a claimant's RFC, " 'the ALJ must first evaluate the claimant's credibility.' " *Wagner v. Astrue*, 499 F.3d 842, 851 (8th Cir.2007) (*quoting Pearsall v. Massanari*, 274 F.3d 1211, 1217 (8th Cir.2002)) Assessing and resolving credibility issues is a matter that is properly within the purview of the ALJ. *Johnson v. Chater*, 87 F.3d 1015, 1018 (8th Cir. 1996) (court will not substitute its own credibility opinion for that of the ALJ). As the Eighth Circuit has observed, "Our touchstone is that [a claimant's] credibility is primarily a matter for the ALJ to

decide.” *Edwards v. Barnhart*, 314 F.3d 964, 966 (8th Cir. 2003). The court should , “ defer to the ALJ's determinations regarding the credibility of testimony, so long as they are supported by good reasons and substantial evidence.” *Perks v. Astrue* 687 F.3d 1086, 1091 (C.A.8 (Ark.),2012). This court concludes that, because the ALJ gave valid reasons for the ALJ's determination that Plaintiffr was not entirely credible, the ALJ's credibility determination is entitled to deference, *see Renstrom v. Astrue*, 680 F.3d 1057, 1067 (8th Cir.2012).

## **2. Development of the Record:**

The ALJ has a duty to fully and fairly develop the record. *See Frankl v. Shalala*, 47 F.3d 935, 938 (8th Cir. 1995)(ALJ must fully and fairly develop the record so that a just determination of disability may be made). This duty exist “even if ... the claimant is represented by counsel.” *Boyd v. Sullivan*, 960 F.2d 733, 736 (8th Cir.1992) (*quoting Warner v. Heckler*, 722 F.2d 428, 431 (8th Cir.1983))

The Commissioner obtained a Mental Diagnostic Evaluation on December 2, 2010 (T. 230), a Psychiatric Review Technique(T. 243) and a Mental RFC Assessment on December 17, 2010 (T. 239-241). The Mental RFC Assessment determined the Plaintiff to be only Moderately Limited in seven areas and Not Significantly Limited in 13 areas. (T. 241). The Commissioner also obtained a Physical Assessment from Dr. Bill Payne on March 29, 2011 which found the Plaintiff ‘s physical condition to be “Not Severe”. (T. 277).

There is no bright line rule indicating when the Commissioner has or has not adequately developed the record; rather, such an assessment is made on a case-by-case basis. *Battles v. Shalala*, 36 F.3d 43 at 45 (C.A.8 (Ark.), 1994). For the reasons stated below, there is nothing in the Plaintiff’s treatment records that the court feels remains undeveloped and the ALJ properly

evaluated the Plaintiff's RFC upon the medical evidence presented.

### **3. RFC Determination**

The ALJ found that the “ opinions of the state agency medical consultants have been considered, and the undersigned concurs with their finding that the claimant is limited to unskilled work. However, based on all the evidence of record including information received at the hearing level, the undersigned finds that the claimant is more limited physically than determined by the state agency consultants.” (T. 20).

While Plaintiff's treating and/or examining physicians never provided a separate medical source statement, Plaintiff's progress notes from 2010 confirm that she only required conservative treatment (Tr. 197-256 ). *See Smith v. Shalala*, 987 F.2d 1371, 1374 (8th Cir. 1993) (holding that treating physician's conservative treatment was inconsistent with plaintiff's allegations of disabling pain). When Plaintiff sought treatment in January 2010, she had no complaints of foot or back problems and a review of her musculoskeletal system was within normal limits (Tr. 200). *See McGeorge v. Barnhart*, 321 F.3d 766, 768 (8th cir. 2003) (examination showed good muscle strength and full ranges of motion that is consistent with a light work finding). However, on her onset date, April 29, 2010, Plaintiff did return for treatment due to a back injury “about a month ago” (Tr. 216-17). All in all, Plaintiff was diagnosed with low back pain and given medication (Tr. 216-17). Plaintiff had no muscle weakness, no stiffness, and no swelling; and she walked without assistance (216-17). Plaintiff's MRI scan and x-rays only showed some scoliosis with intact disc spaces, well preserved vertebral body heights, and no disc herniation (Tr. 221-22).

Plaintiff failed to meet her burden of demonstrating her RFC, *see Perks v. Astrue*, 687

F.3d 1086, 1092 (8th Cir.2012) and the ALJ properly determined the Plaintiff's RFC. The Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals has upheld the Commissioner's RFC assessment in cases where the ALJ did not rely on a treating physician's functional assessment of the claimant's abilities and limitations. *See Page v. Astrue*, 484 F.3d at 1043 (the medical evidence, state agency physician opinions, and claimant's own testimony were sufficient to determine RFC); *Stormo v. Barnhart*, 377 F.3d 801, 807-08 (8th Cir. 2004) (medical evidence, state agency physicians' assessments, and claimant's reported activities of daily living supported RFC finding); *Masterson v. Barnhart*, 363 F.3d 731, 738 (8th Cir. 2004) (ALJ's RFC assessment properly relied upon assessments of consultative physicians and a medical expert, which did not conflict with the treating physician's records). Here the court finds that the medical evidence supports the ALJ's RFC determination.

#### **IV. Conclusion:**

Accordingly, having carefully reviewed the record, the undersigned finds substantial evidence supporting the ALJ's decision, and thus the decision should be affirmed. The undersigned further finds that the plaintiff's Complaint should be dismissed with prejudice.

Dated this October 7, 2013.

*/s/ J. Marschewski*

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HONORABLE JAMES R. MARSCHEWSKI  
CHIEF U. S. MAGISTRATE JUDGE