

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF ARKANSAS
HARRISON DIVISION

DEBRA SPARKS

PLAINTIFF

v.

CIVIL NO. 13-3026

CAROLYN W. COLVIN, Commissioner
Social Security Administration

DEFENDANT

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Plaintiff, Debra Sparks, brings this action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 405(g), seeking judicial review of a decision of the Commissioner of the Social Security Administration (Commissioner) denying her claims for a period of disability and disability insurance benefits (DIB) and supplemental security income (SSI) benefits under the provisions of Titles II and XVI of the Social Security Act (Act). 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:

Plaintiff protectively filed her current applications for DIB and SSI on January 27, 2011, and February 25, 2011, respectively, alleging an inability to work since October 15, 2008,¹ due to major depression, a chronic pain disorder, anxiety, insomnia, nightmares, a mild cardiac prominence, and a lung problem. (Tr. 186, 192, 228). An administrative video hearing was held on January 27, 2012, at which Plaintiff appeared with counsel and testified. (Tr. 68-102).

¹Plaintiff, through her counsel, amended her alleged onset date to January 1, 2011. (Tr. 8, 73).

By written decision dated March 15, 2012, the ALJ found that during the relevant time period, Plaintiff had an impairment or combination of impairments that were severe. (Tr. 10). Specifically, the ALJ found Plaintiff had the following severe impairments: osteoarthritis of the knees, obesity, status post fracture of the ankle status post open reduction with internal fixation, and depression. However, after reviewing all of the evidence presented, the ALJ determined that Plaintiff's impairments did not meet or equal the level of severity of any impairment listed in the Listing of Impairments found in Appendix I, Subpart P, Regulation No. 4. (Tr. 11). The ALJ found Plaintiff retained the residual functional capacity (RFC) to:

perform sedentary work as defined in 20 CFR 404.1567(a) and 416.967(a) except the claimant can perform work involving simple tasks with simple instructions.

(Tr. 13). With the help of a vocational expert, the ALJ determined Plaintiff could perform work as a peanut sorter, an ordinance checker, and an addressing clerk. (Tr. 19).

Plaintiff then requested a review of the hearing decision by the Appeals Council, which denied that request on December 26, 2012. (Tr. 1-3). Subsequently, Plaintiff filed this action. (Doc. 1). This case is before the undersigned pursuant to the consent of the parties. (Doc. 7). Both parties have filed appeal briefs, and the case is now ready for decision. (Docs. 11, 12).

The Court has reviewed the entire transcript. The complete set of facts and arguments are presented in the parties' briefs, and are repeated here only to the extent necessary.

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. Ramirez v. Barnhart, 292 F.3d 576, 583 (8th Cir. 2002). Substantial evidence is less than a preponderance but it is enough that a reasonable mind

would find it adequate to support the Commissioner's decision. The ALJ's decision must be affirmed if the record contains substantial evidence to support it. Edwards v. Barnhart, 314 F.3d 964, 966 (8th Cir. 2003). As long as there is substantial evidence in the record that supports the Commissioner's decision, the Court may not reverse it simply because substantial evidence exists in the record that would have supported a contrary outcome, or because the Court would have decided the case differently. Haley v. Massanari, 258 F.3d 742, 747 (8th Cir. 2001). In other words, if after reviewing the record it is possible to draw two inconsistent positions from the evidence and one of those positions represents the findings of the ALJ, the decision of the ALJ must be affirmed. Young v. Apfel, 221 F.3d 1065, 1068 (8th Cir. 2000).

It is well-established that a claimant for Social Security disability benefits has the burden of proving her disability by establishing a physical or mental disability that has lasted at least one year and that prevents her from engaging in any substantial gainful activity. Pearsall v. Massanari, 274 F.3d 1211, 1217 (8th Cir. 2001); see also 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 her disability, not simply her impairment, has lasted for at least twelve consecutive months.

The Commissioner's regulations require her to apply a five-step sequential evaluation process to each claim for disability benefits: (1) whether the claimant has engaged in substantial gainful activity since filing her claim; (2) whether the claimant has a severe physical and/or mental impairment or combination of impairments; (3) whether the impairment(s) meet or equal

an impairment in the listings; (4) whether the impairment(s) prevent the claimant from doing past relevant work; and, (5) whether the claimant is able to perform other work in the national economy given her age, education, and experience. See 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520, 416.920. Only if the final stage is reached does the fact finder consider the Plaintiff's age, education, and work experience in light of 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.

III. Discussion:

Plaintiff argues the following issues on appeal: 1) the ALJ erred in determining Plaintiff's severe impairments; 2) the ALJ erred in determining that Plaintiff did not meet Listing 12.05(C); 3) the ALJ erred in determining Plaintiff's RFC; and 4) the ALJ's decision is not supported by substantial evidence.

A. Plaintiff's Impairments:

At Step Two of the sequential analysis, the ALJ is required to determine whether a claimant's impairments are severe. See 20 C .F.R. § 404.1520(c). To be severe, an impairment only needs to have more than a minimal impact on a claimant's ability to perform work-related activities. See Social Security Ruling 96-3p. The Step Two requirement is only a threshold test so the claimant's burden is minimal and does not require a showing that the impairment is disabling in nature. See Brown v. Yuckert, 482 U.S. 137, 153-54 (1987). The claimant, however, has the burden of proof of showing she suffers from a medically-severe impairment at Step Two. See Mittlestedt v. Apfel, 204 F.3d 847, 852 (8th Cir.2000).

The ALJ clearly considered all of Plaintiff's impairments, including the impairments that were found to be non-severe. See Swartz v. Barnhart, 188 F. App'x 361, 368 (6th Cir.2006)

(where ALJ finds at least one “severe” impairment and proceeds to assess claimant's RFC based on all alleged impairments, any error in failing to identify particular impairment as “severe” at step two is harmless); Elmore v. Astrue, 2012 WL 1085487 *12 (E.D. Mo. March 5, 2012); see also 20 C.F.R. § 416.945(a)(2) (in assessing RFC, ALJ must consider “all of [a claimant's] medically determinable impairments ..., including ... impairments that are not ‘severe’ ”); § 416.923 (ALJ must “consider the combined effect of all [the claimant's] impairments without regard to whether any such impairment, if considered separately, would be of sufficient severity”). The Court finds the ALJ did not commit reversible error in setting forth Plaintiff's severe impairments.

B. Listing Impairment 12.05C:

Under Listing 12.05C, a claimant suffers from the required severity of mental retardation if she shows a valid verbal, performance, or full scale IQ of 60 through 70, with an onset prior to age 22, and a physical or other mental impairment imposing an additional and significant work-related limitation of function. 20 C.F.R. Pt. 404, Subpt. P, App. 1, § 12.05C; McNamara v. Astrue, 590 F.3d 607, 611 (8th Cir. 2010). When trying to establish that the Listing 12.05C requirements have been met, the claimant must also meet the requirements in the introductory paragraph of Listing 12.05. Maresh v. Barnhart, 438 F.3d 897, 899 (8th Cir. 2006). Those requirements clearly include demonstrating that the claimant suffered “deficits in adaptive functioning” and that those deficits “initially manifest during the developmental period [before age 22].” 20 C.F.R. Pt. 404, Subpt. P, App. 1, § 12.05; Cheatum v. Astrue, 388 Fed. Appx. 574, 576 (8th Cir. 2010)(citations omitted).

The Court finds, based upon the well-stated reasons outlined in the Defendant's brief, that Plaintiff's argument is without merit, and that there was sufficient evidence for the ALJ to make an informed decision. Therefore, the Court finds there is substantial evidence of record to support the ALJ's finding that Plaintiff did not meet Listing 12.05C.

C. RFC Assessment:

RFC is the most a person can do despite that person's limitations. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1545(a)(1). 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). "[T]he ALJ is [also] required to set forth specifically a claimant's limitations and to determine how those limitations affect his RFC." Id.

After reviewing the entire record, the Court finds that Plaintiff's argument is without merit, and there was sufficient evidence for the ALJ to make an informed decision. The Court notes that in determining Plaintiff could perform sedentary work with limitations, the ALJ specifically discussed the relevant medical records and Plaintiff's subjective complaints. The ALJ also discussed the medical opinions of examining and non-examining medical professionals,

including the opinions of Drs. Rex Ross, Steven Allen Shry, Nancy A. Bunting, and Vann Arthur Smith, and set forth the reasons for the weight given to the opinions. Renstrom v. Astrue, 680 F.3d 1057, 1065 (8th Cir. 2012) (“It is the ALJ’s function to resolve conflicts among the opinions of various treating and examining physicians”)(citations omitted). The ALJ also took Plaintiff’s obesity into account when determining that she could perform sedentary work with limitations. Heino v. Astrue, 578 F.3d 873, 881-882 (8th Cir. 2009) (when an ALJ references the claimant’s obesity during the claim evaluation process, such review may be sufficient to avoid reversal). Based on the record as a whole, the Court finds substantial evidence to support the ALJ’s RFC determination for the relevant time period.

D. Fully and Fairly Develop the Record:

While an ALJ is required to develop the record fully and fairly, see Freeman v. Apfel, 208 F.3d 687, 692 (8th Cir.2000) (ALJ must order consultative examination only when it is necessary for an informed decision), the record before the ALJ contained the evidence required to make a full and informed decision regarding Plaintiff’s capabilities during the relevant time period. See Strongson v. Barnhart, 361 F.3d 1066, 1071-72 (8th Cir.2004) (ALJ must develop record fully and fairly to ensure it includes evidence from treating physician, or at least examining physician, addressing impairments at issue).

E. Subjective Complaints and Credibility Analysis:

The ALJ was required to consider all the evidence relating to Plaintiff’s subjective complaints including evidence presented by third parties that relates to: (1) Plaintiff’s daily activities; (2) the duration, frequency, and intensity of her pain; (3) precipitating and aggravating factors; (4) dosage, effectiveness, and side effects of her medication; and (5) functional

restrictions. See Polaski v. Heckler, 739 F.2d 1320, 1322 (8th Cir. 1984). While an ALJ may not discount a claimant's subjective complaints solely because the medical evidence fails to support them, an ALJ may discount those complaints where inconsistencies appear in the record as a whole. Id. As the United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit 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).

After reviewing the administrative record, it is clear that the ALJ properly considered and evaluated Plaintiff's subjective complaints, including the Polaski factors. A review of the record reveals that during the relevant time period, Plaintiff reported that she was able to help with household chores; take care of her personal needs; prepare simple meals; shop for food; and watch television and use a computer. (Tr. 255, 287, 427). The record revealed that Plaintiff reported that she went camping and used the internet to research job opportunities in May of 2011. (Tr. 477, 480). Plaintiff also denied pain during a psychiatric progress appointments in May and June of 2011. (Tr. 478, 481).

With regard to the testimony of Plaintiff's sister and friend, the ALJ properly considered the testimony of Plaintiff's sister and the statement of Plaintiff friend, but found both unconvincing. This determination was within the ALJ's province. See Siemers v. Shalala, 47 F.3d 299, 302 (8th Cir. 1995); Ownbey v. Shalala, 5 F.3d 342, 345 (8th Cir. 1993).

Therefore, although it is clear that Plaintiff suffers with some degree of limitation, she has not established that she was unable to engage in any gainful activity during the relevant time period. Accordingly, the Court concludes that substantial evidence supports the ALJ's conclusion that Plaintiff's subjective complaints were not totally credible.

F. Hypothetical Question to the Vocational Expert:

After thoroughly reviewing the hearing transcript along with the entire evidence of record, the Court finds that the hypothetical the ALJ posed to the vocational expert fully set forth the impairments which the ALJ accepted as true and which were supported by the record as a whole. Goff v. Barnhart, 421 F.3d 785, 794 (8th Cir. 2005). Accordingly, the Court finds that the vocational expert's opinion constitutes substantial evidence supporting the ALJ's conclusion that Plaintiff's impairments did not preclude her from performing work as a peanut sorter, an ordinance checker, and an addressing clerk. Pickney v. Chater, 96 F.3d 294, 296 (8th Cir. 1996)(testimony from vocational expert based on properly phrased hypothetical question constitutes substantial evidence).

IV. Conclusion:

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

DATED this 23rd day of April, 2014.

/s/ *Erin L. Setser*

HON. ERIN L. SETSER
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE