

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

ALLEN C. WOODS

PLAINTIFF

v.

CIVIL NO. 13-3060

CAROLYN W. COLVIN, Commissioner
Social Security Administration

DEFENDANT

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Plaintiff, Allen C. Woods, 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 his claim for supplemental security income (SSI) benefits under the provisions of Title 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 his application for SSI on February 11, 2011, alleging an inability to work due to mental retardation, depression, and ulcerative colitis. (Tr. 114, 138). An administrative hearing was held on December 16, 2011, at which Plaintiff appeared with counsel and testified. (Tr. 27-68).

By written decision dated May 18, 2012, the ALJ found that during the relevant time period, Plaintiff had an impairment or combination of impairments that were severe. (Tr. 12). Specifically, the ALJ found Plaintiff had the following severe impairments: a learning disorder. 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. 13). The ALJ found Plaintiff retained the residual functional capacity (RFC) to:

perform a full range of work at all exertional levels but with the following non-exertional limitations: limited to unskilled work.

(Tr. 14). The ALJ, with the use of the Medical-Vocational Guidelines (Guidelines), found Plaintiff was not disabled. (Tr. 21).

Plaintiff then requested a review of the hearing decision by the Appeals Council, which denied that request on April 19, 2013. (Tr. 1-3). Subsequently, Plaintiff filed this action. (Doc. 1). This case is before the undersigned pursuant to the consent of the parties. (Doc. 8). Both parties have filed appeal briefs, and the case is now ready for decision. (Docs.12,13).

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 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 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 his disability, not simply his 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 his 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 his age, education, and experience. See 20 C.F.R. § 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 his residual functional capacity. See McCoy v. Schweiker, 683 F.2d 1138, 1141-42 (8th Cir. 1982); 20 C.F.R. § 416.920.

III. Discussion:

After reviewing the entire record, the Court is concerned with the ALJ's reliance upon the Guidelines, to determine that Plaintiff was not disabled at Step 5 of the Sequential Evaluation Process.¹ Resort to the Guidelines is only appropriate when there are no non-exertional impairments that substantially limit the ability of a claimant to perform substantially gainful activity. Once a determination is made that a claimant cannot perform past relevant work, the burden shifts to the Commissioner to prove there is work in the economy that the claimant can perform. Robinson v. Sullivan, 956 F.2d 836, 839 (8th Cir.1992). If the claimant is found to have only exertional impairments, the Commissioner may meet this burden by referring to the Guidelines. See Robinson, 956 F.2d at 839. If, however, the claimant is also found to have non-exertional impairments that diminish the claimant's capacity to perform the full range of jobs listed in the Guidelines, the Commissioner must solicit testimony from a vocational expert to establish that there are jobs in the national economy that the claimant can perform. See id. On the other hand, "an ALJ may use the Guidelines even though there is a nonexertional impairment if the ALJ finds, and the record supports the finding, that the nonexertional impairment does not diminish the claimant's residual functional capacity to perform the full range of activities listed in the Guidelines." Lucy v. Chater, 113 F.3d 905, 908 (8th Cir.1997)(citations omitted).

In this case, the ALJ found Plaintiff's learning disorder was a severe impairment. The ALJ further found Plaintiff maintained a RFC to perform unskilled work at all exertional levels,

¹The Court notes that neither party addressed the ALJ's use of the Guidelines in their appeal briefs filed with this Court.

and that pursuant to Rule 204.00 of the Guidelines there are a significant number of jobs in the national economy that Plaintiff can perform. As the evidence reflects that Plaintiff's non-exertional limitations are due to a mental impairment, the ALJ erred in relying upon the Guidelines to meet Defendant's burden at Step 5 of the Sequential Evaluation Process. See Brock v. Astrue, 674 F.3d 1062, 1065 (8th Cir.2012)(ALJ must consult a vocational expert instead of relying on Guidelines when claimant suffered from severe mental impairments). Accordingly, the Court finds remand necessary so that the ALJ can more fully and fairly develop the record regarding Plaintiff's ability to perform other jobs in the national economy.

On remand, the ALJ is directed to address interrogatories to a vocational expert to determine whether there are jobs in significant numbers in the national economy that Plaintiff can perform. The undersigned acknowledges that the ALJ's decision may be the same after proper analysis. Nonetheless, proper analysis must occur. Groeper v. Sullivan, 932 F.2d 1234, 1239 (8th Cir. 1991).

IV. Conclusion:

Accordingly, the Court concludes that the ALJ's decision is not supported by substantial evidence, and therefore, the denial of benefits to the Plaintiff should be reversed and this matter should be remanded to the Commissioner for further consideration pursuant to sentence four of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g).

DATED this 22nd day of July, 2014.

/s/ Erin L. Setser

HON. ERIN L. SETSER
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE