

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

RANDY WILLIS

PLAINTIFF

v.

CIVIL NO. 12-5182

CAROLYN W. COLVIN,¹ Commissioner
Social Security Administration

DEFENDANT

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Plaintiff, Randy Willis, 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 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 his current applications for DIB and SSI on July 17, 2009, alleging an inability to work since March 1, 2008, due to “back problems, slow learner, legs.” (Tr. 116, 120, 157). An administrative hearing was held on July 20, 2010, at which Plaintiff appeared with counsel and testified. (Tr. 27-56).

¹Carolyn W. Colvin, has been appointed to serve as acting Commissioner of Social Security, and is substituted as Defendant, pursuant to Rule 25(d)(1) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure.

By written decision dated December 7, 2010, the ALJ found that during the relevant time period, Plaintiff had an impairment or combination of impairments that were severe. (Tr. 16). Specifically, the ALJ found Plaintiff had the following severe impairments: mental retardation, depression, and methamphetamine abuse. 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. 17). 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 nonexertional limitations: the claimant is limited to work where interpersonal contact is incidental to the work performed, where the complexity of tasks is learned and performed by rote with few variables and little judgment required, and where supervision required is simple, direct, and concrete.

(Tr. 18). With the help of a vocational expert, the ALJ determined Plaintiff could perform his past relevant work as a sanitation worker, a wood-worker, and a production worker. (Tr. 21).

Plaintiff then requested a review of the hearing decision by the Appeals Council, which after reviewing additional evidence submitted by Plaintiff, denied that request on June 20, 2012. (Tr. 1-5). Subsequently, Plaintiff filed this action. (Doc. 1). This case is before the undersigned pursuant to the consent of the parties. (Doc. 4). 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. §§ 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 his 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 contends that the ALJ erred in concluding that the Plaintiff was not disabled because: 1) the ALJ erred in not finding that Plaintiff met Listing 12.05(c); 2) the ALJ's RFC decision is not supported by substantial evidence; 3) the ALJ's credibility analysis is not supported by substantial evidence; and 4) the ALJ erred to fully and fairly develop the record.

A. Listing Impairment 12.05C:

Under Listing 12.05C, a claimant suffers from the required severity of mental retardation if he 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.

B. The ALJ’s RFC Determination:

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 his 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.

In the present case, the ALJ considered the medical assessments of examining and non-examining agency medical consultants, Plaintiff's subjective complaints, and his medical records when he determined Plaintiff could perform work at all exertional levels with non-exertional limitations. The ALJ discussed the medical opinions of treating, examining, and non-examining medical professionals, including the opinions of Drs. Denise LaGrand, Rayetta Eaton, Ronald Crow, Bill F. Payne, Cheryl Woodson-Johnson, and Winston Brown, 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). Based on the record as a whole, the Court finds substantial evidence to support the ALJ's RFC determination.

C. 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 his pain; (3) precipitating and aggravating factors; (4) dosage, effectiveness, and side effects of his 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 Eighth Circuit has observed, "Our touchstone is that [a claimant's] credibility is primarily a matter for the ALJ to decide." Edwards, 314 F.3d at 966.

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

revealed that Plaintiff reported to Dr. LaGrand that he could perform activities of daily living without difficulty. (Tr. 259). The ALJ also noted that Plaintiff lied to Dr. LaGrand when he reported that he had no substance abuse problems. In a Function Report dated August 22, 2009, completed by Plaintiff, Plaintiff indicated that he could take care of his personal needs, that he could drive a car alone, that he could shop for food, and that he was able to sit and visit with friends daily. (Tr. 174-181).

The Court would also note that while Plaintiff alleged an inability to seek treatment due to a lack of finances, the record is void of any indication that Plaintiff had been denied treatment due to the lack of funds. Murphy v. Sullivan, 953 F.3d 383, 386-87 (8th Cir. 1992) (holding that lack of evidence that plaintiff sought low-cost medical treatment from her doctor, clinics, or hospitals does not support plaintiff's contention of financial hardship). The ALJ also pointed out that while Plaintiff indicated that he could not seek treatment for his back and leg pain due to the lack of funds, Plaintiff did seek treatment for dental pain on at least two occasions. The ALJ also noted that Plaintiff was able to come up with the funds to support his smoking and occasional meth habits during the relevant time period.

Therefore, although it is clear that Plaintiff suffers with some degree of pain, he has not established that he is unable to engage in any gainful activity. See Craig v. Apfel, 212 F.3d 433, 436 (8th Cir. 2000) (holding that mere fact that working may cause pain or discomfort does not mandate a finding of disability). Accordingly, the Court concludes that substantial evidence supports the ALJ's conclusion that Plaintiff's subjective complaints were not totally credible.

D. Past Relevant Work:

Plaintiff has the initial burden of proving that he suffers from a medically determinable impairment which precludes the performance of past work. Kirby v. Sullivan, 923 F.2d 1323, 1326 (8th Cir. 1991). Only after the claimant establishes that a disability precludes performance of past relevant work will the burden shift to the Commissioner to prove that the claimant can perform other work. Pickner v. Sullivan, 985 F.2d 401, 403 (8th Cir. 1993).

According to the Commissioner's interpretation of past relevant work, a claimant will not be found to be disabled if he retains the RFC to perform:

1. The actual functional demands and job duties of a particular past relevant job; *or*
2. The functional demands and job duties of the occupation as generally required by employers throughout the national economy.

20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(e); S.S.R. 82-61 (1982); Martin v. Sullivan, 901 F.2d 650, 653 (8th Cir. 1990)(expressly approving the two part test from S.S.R. 82-61).

The Court notes in this case the ALJ relied upon the testimony of a vocational expert, who testified that Plaintiff's past relevant work as a sanitation worker, a wood-worker, and a production worker were jobs within Plaintiff's determined RFC. See Gilbert v. Apfel, 175 F.3d 602, 604 (8th Cir. 1999) ("The testimony of a vocational expert is relevant at steps four and five of the Commissioner's sequential analysis, when the question becomes whether a claimant with a severe impairment has the residual functional capacity to do past relevant work or other work") (citations omitted). Accordingly, the ALJ properly concluded Plaintiff could perform his past relevant work as a sanitation worker, a wood-worker, and a production worker.

E. 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).

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 6th day of November, 2013.

/s/ Erin L. Setser

HON. ERIN L. SETSER
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE