

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

BRADLEY J. KAHL

PLAINTIFF

v.

CIVIL NO. 15-5077

CAROLYN W. COLVIN, Commissioner
Social Security Administration

DEFENDANT

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Plaintiff, Bradley, J. Kahl, 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 supplemental security income (SSI) benefits under the provisions of Titles 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 application for SSI on May 10, 2012, alleging an inability to work due to attention deficit disorder (ADD), anxiety, a cognitive disorder, and Asperger's. (Tr. 105, 126). An administrative video hearing was held on June 14, 2013, at which Plaintiff appeared with counsel and testified. (Tr. 30-65).

By written decision dated January 30, 2014, 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: Asperger's

disorder, and a generalized anxiety 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. 16-17). 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: He can perform simple, routine, repetitive tasks in an environment where interpersonal contact is incidental to the work performed, and he can respond to supervision that is simple, direct, and concrete.

(Tr. 17). With the help of a vocational expert, the ALJ determined Plaintiff could perform work as a dump truck driver, a conveyor/feeder offbearer, and a power screwdriver operator. (Tr. 24-25).

Plaintiff then requested a review of the hearing decision by the Appeals Council, which denied that request on March 11, 2015. (Tr. 1-6). Subsequently, Plaintiff filed this action. (Doc. 1). This case is before the undersigned pursuant to the consent of the parties. (Doc. 6). Both parties have filed appeal briefs, and the case is now ready for decision. (Docs. 9, 10).

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 his 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), abrogated on other grounds by Higgins v. Apfel, 222 F.3d 504, 505 (8th Cir. 2000); 20 C.F.R. § 416.920.

III. Discussion:

Of particular concern to the undersigned is 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 determined that Plaintiff was able to perform work at all exertional levels. With respect to Plaintiff's mental RFC, the ALJ determined Plaintiff was able to perform simple, routine, and repetitive tasks where interpersonal contact was incidental to the work performed, and supervision was simple, direct, and concrete. In determining Plaintiff's mental RFC, the ALJ stated that he gave the opinion of Dr. Suzanne McKenna, a consultative examiner, great weight. However, after reviewing Dr. McKenna's evaluation

notes and findings, the mental RFC does not include the limitations that Plaintiff was found to have by Dr. McKenna, and the ALJ failed to give a reason for not including these limitations when determining Plaintiff mental abilities. For example, the ALJ found Plaintiff had moderate limitations with concentration, persistence and pace. (Tr. 17). However, in September of 2013, Dr. McKenna opined that Plaintiff experienced moderate to significant problems with attention and concentration. (Tr. 640). Dr. McKenna further opined that Plaintiff had moderate to significant difficulty completing work-like tasks within an acceptable timeframe. As the only mental RFC completed was prior to the examination performed by Dr. McKenna, and there is an inconsistency between the ALJ's RFC finding and the opinion of Dr. McKenna, whom the ALJ stated he gave great weight, the Court finds remand necessary for the ALJ to more fully and fairly develop the record with respect to Plaintiff's mental RFC.

On remand, the ALJ is directed to address interrogatories Dr. McKenna, or to another mental health professional, requesting that said professional review all of Plaintiff's medical records; complete a RFC assessment regarding Plaintiff's capabilities during the time period in question; and give the objective basis for the opinion so that an informed decision can be made regarding Plaintiff's ability to perform basic work activities on a sustained basis.

With this evidence, the ALJ should then re-evaluate Plaintiff's RFC and specifically list in a hypothetical to a vocational expert any limitations that are indicated in the RFC assessment and supported by the evidence. While the Court did not address the ALJ's Step 5 finding, it did not go unnoticed by the Court that Plaintiff was found to be able to perform work as a truck driver, when the record clearly establishes that Plaintiff has been unable to obtain a driver's license.

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 14th day of April, 2016.

/s/ Erin L. Setser

HON. ERIN L. SETSER
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE