

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

PAMELA K. WARTNER,  
Plaintiff,  
v.  
ANDREW SAUL, Commissioner of Social  
Security,  
Defendant.

No. 2:17-cv-0387 DB

ORDER

Plaintiff brought this action seeking judicial review of a final administrative decision denying an application for Disability Insurance Benefits Under Title II of the Social Security Act (“the Act”) and for Supplemental Security Income under Title XVI of the Act. By order filed September 7, 2018, plaintiff’s motion for summary judgment was granted, the decision of the Commissioner was reversed, and the case was remanded for further proceedings.<sup>1</sup> (ECF No. 19.)

On October 2, 2019, counsel for plaintiff filed a motion for an award of attorney’s fees pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 406(b). (ECF No. 23.) Specifically, plaintiff and plaintiff’s counsel entered into a contingent-fee agreement. (ECF No. 23-1.) Pursuant to that agreement plaintiff’s counsel now seeks attorney’s fees in the amount of \$10,279.57, which represents 16% of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Both parties have previously consented to Magistrate Judge jurisdiction over this action pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 636(c). (See ECF Nos. 7 & 8.)

1 retroactive disability benefits received by plaintiff on remand, for approximately 18.5 hours of  
2 attorney time expended on this matter. (ECF No. 23 at 3.) Defendant filed “an analysis of the fee  
3 request” but “takes no position on the reasonableness of the request.” (ECF No. 24 at 4.)

4 Attorneys are entitled to fees for cases in which they have successfully represented social  
5 security claimants.

6 Whenever a court renders a judgment favorable to a claimant under  
7 this subchapter who was represented before the court by an attorney,  
8 the court may determine and allow as part of its judgment a  
9 reasonable fee for such representation, not in excess of 25 percent of  
10 the total of the past-due benefits to which the claimant is entitled by  
reason of such judgment, and the Commissioner of Social Security  
may . . . certify the amount of such fee for payment to such attorney  
out of, and not in addition to, the amount of such past-due benefits.

11 42 U.S.C. § 406(b)(1)(A). “In contrast to fees awarded under fee-shifting provisions such as 42  
12 U.S.C. § 1988, the fee is paid by the claimant out of the past-due benefits awarded; the losing  
13 party is not responsible for payment.” Crawford v. Astrue, 586 F.3d 1142, 1147 (9th Cir. 2009)  
14 (en banc) (citing Gisbrecht v. Barnhart, 535 U.S. 789, 802 (2002)). Although an attorney fee  
15 award pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 406(b) is not paid by the government, the Commissioner has  
16 standing to challenge the award. Craig v. Sec’y Dep’t of Health & Human Servs., 864 F.2d 324,  
17 328 (4th Cir. 1989), abrogated on other grounds in Gisbrecht, 535 U.S. at 807. The goal of fee  
18 awards under § 406(b) is to provide adequate incentive to attorneys for representing claimants  
19 while ensuring that the usually meager disability benefits received are not greatly depleted.  
20 Cotter v. Bowen, 879 F.2d 359, 365 (8th Cir. 1989).

21 The 25% statutory maximum fee is not an automatic entitlement, and the court must  
22 ensure that the fee actually requested is reasonable. Gisbrecht, 535 U.S. at 808-09 (“[Section]  
23 406(b) does not displace contingent-fee agreements within the statutory ceiling; instead, § 406(b)  
24 instructs courts to review for reasonableness fees yielded by those agreements.”). “Within the 25  
25 percent boundary . . . the attorney for the successful claimant must show that the fee sought is  
26 reasonable for the services rendered.” Id. at 807. “[A] district court charged with determining a  
27 reasonable fee award under § 406(b)(1)(A) must respect ‘the primacy of lawful attorney-client fee

28 ///

1 arrangements,' 'looking first to the contingent-fee agreement, then testing it for reasonableness.'"  
2 Crawford, 586 F.3d at 1149 (quoting Gisbrecht, 535 U.S. at 793 & 808).

3 The Supreme Court has identified five factors that may be considered in determining  
4 whether a fee award under a contingent-fee arrangement is unreasonable and therefore subject to  
5 reduction by the court: (1) the character of the representation; (2) the results achieved by the  
6 representative; (3) whether the attorney engaged in dilatory conduct in order to increase the  
7 accrued amount of past-due benefits; (4) whether the benefits are large in comparison to the  
8 amount of time counsel spent on the case; and (5) the attorney's record of hours worked and  
9 counsel's regular hourly billing charge for noncontingent cases. Crawford, 586 F.3d at 1151-52  
10 (citing Gisbrecht, 535 U.S. at 808). Below, the court will consider these factors in assessing  
11 whether the fee requested by counsel in this case pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 406(b) is reasonable.

12 Here, there is no indication that a reduction of fees is warranted due to any substandard  
13 performance by counsel. Rather, plaintiff's counsel is an experienced attorney who secured a  
14 successful result for plaintiff. There is also no evidence that plaintiff's counsel engaged in any  
15 dilatory conduct resulting in excessive delay. The court finds that the \$10,279.57 fee, which  
16 represents 16% of the past-due benefits paid to plaintiff, is not excessive in relation to the benefits  
17 awarded. In making this determination, the court recognizes the contingent fee nature of this case  
18 and counsel's assumption of the risk of going uncompensated in agreeing to represent plaintiff on  
19 such terms. See Hearn v. Barnhart, 262 F. Supp.2d 1033, 1037 (N.D. Cal. 2003). Finally,  
20 counsel has submitted a detailed billing statement in support of the requested fee. (ECF No. 23-  
21 4.)

22 Accordingly, for the reasons stated above, the court concludes that the fees sought by  
23 counsel pursuant to § 406(b) are reasonable. See generally Azevedo v. Commissioner of Social  
24 Security, No. 1:11-cv-1341 AWI SAB, 2013 WL 6086666, at \*2 (E.D. Cal. Nov. 19, 2013)  
25 (granting petition pursuant to 406(b) for \$17,893.75 in attorney's fees); Coulter v. Commissioner  
26 of Social Security, No. 1:10-cv-1937 AWI JLT, 2013 WL 5969674, at \*2 (E.D. Cal. Nov. 8,  
27 2013) (recommending award of \$15,084.23 in attorney's fees pursuant to 406(b)); Taylor v.  
28 Astrue, No. 1:06-cv-00957-SMS, 2011 WL 836740, at \*2 (E.D. Cal. Mar. 4, 2011) (granting

1 petition pursuant to 406(b) for \$20,960 in attorneys' fees); Jamieson v. Astrue, No. 1:09cv0490  
2 LJO DLB, 2011 WL 587096, at \*2 (E.D. Cal. Feb. 9, 2011) (recommending award of \$34,500 in  
3 attorney fees pursuant to 406(b)).

4 An award of § 406(b) fees is, however, offset by any prior award of attorney's fees  
5 granted under the Equal Access to Justice Act ("EAJA"). 28 U.S.C. § 2412; Gisbrecht, 535 U.S.  
6 at 796. Here, plaintiff's counsel was previously awarded \$3,000 in EAJA fees and the award  
7 under § 406(b) must be offset by that amount. (ECF No. 22.)


8 Accordingly, IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that:

9 1. Plaintiff's October 2, 2019 motion for attorney fees under 42 U.S.C. § 406(b), (ECF  
10 No. 23), is granted;

11 2. Counsel for plaintiff is awarded \$10,279.57 in attorney fees under § 406(b). The  
12 Commissioner is directed to pay the fee forthwith and remit to plaintiff the remainder any  
13 withheld benefits; and

14 3. Upon receipt of the \$10,279.57 in attorney fees pursuant to § 406(b), counsel shall  
15 reimburse plaintiff in the amount of \$3,000 previously paid by the government under the EAJA.

16 Dated: December 4, 2019

17  
18  
19   
20 DEBORAH BARNES  
21 UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE

22  
23 DLB:6  
24 DB\orders\orders.soc sec\wartner0387.406(b).ord