

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE DISTRICT OF ARIZONA

Dirk N. vanMerkestyn v. Commissioner of Social Security Administration

vanMerkestyn v. Commissioner · No. CV-25-00503-PHX-KML · Decided March 30, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the District of Arizona adopted the magistrate judge’s Report and Recommendation and affirmed the denial of Dirk N. vanMerkestyn’s application for Social Security Disability Insurance benefits. The court held that the administrative law judge provided sufficient reasons for discounting vanMerkestyn’s symptom testimony and the assessments of treating counselor David Jones, LCSW. The court ordered entry of final judgment and closure of the case.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the District of Arizona
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Krissa M. Lanham
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the District of Arizona
DECIDED	March 30, 2026
DOCKET	CV-25-00503-PHX-KML
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Plaintiff sought judicial review of an administrative law judge's denial of Social Security Disability Insurance benefits. After a magistrate judge recommended affirmance, plaintiff objected, and the district court conducted de novo review of the challenged portions of the Report and Recommendation.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The district court conducted de novo review of the portions of the magistrate judge's Report and Recommendation to which plaintiff objected. The court reviewed the ALJ's decision under the applicable substantial-evidence and legal-error standards, including whether the ALJ provided specific, clear, and convincing reasons for rejecting symptom testimony and adequately explained the persuasiveness of medical opinions.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished and nonprecedential

PARTIES

Dirk N. vanMerkestyn v. Commissioner of Social Security
Administration

TOPICS

judicial review of agency action

administrative law

ada / disability

civil procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

Social Security

Administrative Law

Disability Benefits

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the ALJ provided legally sufficient reasons for rejecting vanMerkestyn's testimony concerning the severity of his symptoms.
2. Whether the ALJ adequately explained and supported the decision to discount the medical-opinion assessments completed by David Jones, LCSW.

HOLDINGS

1. The ALJ provided specific, clear, and convincing reasons for rejecting vanMerkestyn's testimony regarding the severity of his symptoms because his documented daily activities, travel, studies, hobbies, and other activities were inconsistent with his assertion that he needed to spend all day in bed.
2. The ALJ adequately explained and supported the decision to discount Jones's assessments because they were primarily unexplained check-box forms and were inconsistent with Jones's treatment notes, the consultative examination, and vanMerkestyn's daily activities.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“ “[A]n ALJ can reject the claimant’s testimony about the severity of [his] symptoms only by offering specific, clear, and convincing reasons for doing so.” ” (at 3)

“ “A claimant does not need to be utterly incapacitated in order to be disabled.” ” (at 4)

“The most important factors in evaluating the persuasiveness of medical opinions are “supportability” and “consistency.” ” (at 5)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

VanMerkestyn applied for disability benefits based on depression, social anxiety, and headaches. He testified that he spent much of his time in bed and experienced disabling symptoms, but the record also showed that he performed household chores, cared for dogs, prepared meals, shopped, traveled, studied computer programming, pursued hobbies, and worked on mechanical and 3D-printing projects. David Jones, LCSW, completed two largely check-box assessments describing substantial functional limitations, but the assessments contained little explanation and conflicted in material respects with Jones's treatment notes and other evidence.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

An ALJ denied vanMerkestyn's application for Social Security Disability Insurance benefits. The case was referred to a magistrate judge, who issued a Report and Recommendation recommending that the ALJ's decision be affirmed. VanMerkestyn objected, but the district court adopted the Report and Recommendation in the relevant part and affirmed the ALJ's decision.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Smartt v. Kijakazi, 53 F.4th 489, 494, 499-500 (9th Cir. 2022)
- Revels v. Berryhill, 874 F.3d 648, 667-68 (9th Cir. 2017)
- Woods v. Kijakazi, 32 F.4th 785, 791-92 (9th Cir. 2022)
- Kitchen v. Kijakazi, 82 F.4th 732, 740-41 (9th Cir. 2023)
- Howard ex rel. Wolff v. Barnhart, 341 F.3d 1006, 1012 (9th Cir. 2003)
- Lambert v. Saul, 980 F.3d 1266, 1277 (9th Cir. 2020)