

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF
OHIO, EASTERN DIVISION

Hilary C. v. Commissioner of the Social Security Administration

Hilary C. · No. 2:23-cv-01089 · Decided January 13, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Southern District of Ohio grants Plaintiff’s motion for attorney’s fees under 42 U.S.C. § 406(b)(1) in the amount of \$2,195.00 following a successful Social Security appeal and remand. The court finds the fee reasonable and orders counsel to refund the previously awarded \$898.40 in EAJA fees to Plaintiff.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Southern District of Ohio, Eastern Division
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Caroline H. Gentry
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Southern District of Ohio, Eastern Division
DECIDED	January 13, 2026
DOCKET	2:23-cv-01089
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Plaintiff moved for an award of attorney's fees under 42 U.S.C. § 406(b)(1) after obtaining a sentence-four remand, receiving past-due benefits, and previously receiving an EAJA fee award. The Commissioner did not oppose the requested fee.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The Court independently reviewed the contingent-fee agreement and supporting evidence to determine whether the requested § 406(b)(1) fee was reasonable for the services rendered, subject to the statutory 25-percent ceiling and applicable Sixth Circuit guidance.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unknown; unpublished district court decision
PARTIES	Hilary C. v. Commissioner of the Social Security Administration

TOPICS

- attorney fees
- judicial review of agency action
- administrative law
- remedies
- civil procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

Social Security

Administrative law

Attorney's fees

Federal civil procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether Plaintiff's counsel was entitled to an attorney's-fee award under 42 U.S.C. § 406(b)(1) after Plaintiff obtained past-due benefits following a sentence-four remand.
2. Whether the requested \$2,195.00 contingent fee was reasonable in light of the fee agreement, the work performed, the results achieved, the effective hourly rate, and the statutory 25-percent ceiling.
3. Whether counsel was required to refund the previously awarded EAJA fee to Plaintiff after receiving the § 406(b)(1) award.

HOLDINGS

1. A contingent-fee request under 42 U.S.C. § 406(b)(1) is not automatically reasonable merely because it falls within a 25-percent fee agreement; the court must independently review the agreement and determine whether the requested amount reasonably compensates counsel for federal-court work.
2. Plaintiff's counsel was entitled to \$2,195.00 in § 406(b)(1) attorney's fees because the requested amount was reasonable and represented only approximately 3.4 percent of Plaintiff's past-due benefits.
3. After receiving the § 406(b)(1) fee, counsel must refund the previously awarded EAJA fee of \$898.40 to Plaintiff to prevent a double recovery.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Therefore, a request for a contingency fee award in the amount of 25% of past-due benefits “is not to be viewed as per se reasonable,” but instead shall be given “the weight ordinarily accorded a rebuttable presumption.”” (II)

“Thus, the rule in the Sixth Circuit is that “[a] hypothetical hourly rate that is less than twice the standard rate is per se reasonable, and a hypothetical hourly rate that is equal to or greater than twice the standard rate may well be reasonable.”” (II)

“Plaintiff’s counsel achieved excellent results in an economical fashion and there is no basis to reduce the attorney’s fees requested in this case.” (III)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Plaintiff obtained a sentence-four remand of the Commissioner's denial of Social Security benefits and subsequently received \$65,342.00 in past-due benefits. The Commissioner withheld \$7,200.00 for possible attorney's fees. Plaintiff's counsel documented 2.5 attorney hours and 4.0 paralegal hours and requested \$2,195.00 under a contingent-fee agreement that allowed a fee of up to 25 percent of past-due benefits. Counsel represented that the previously awarded \$898.40 EAJA fee would be refunded to Plaintiff.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The Court previously reversed the Administrative Law Judge's nondisability determination and remanded the case to the Commissioner under sentence four of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g). On remand, Plaintiff was awarded past-due benefits. The Court had previously awarded Plaintiff's counsel \$898.40 under the Equal Access to Justice Act. Plaintiff then sought \$2,195.00 in fees under § 406(b)(1), and the Court granted the motion, directing counsel to refund the EAJA award to Plaintiff and directing the Commissioner to release any remaining withheld funds.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- Horenstein v. Secretary of HHS, 35 F.3d 261, 262 (6th Cir. 1994) (en banc)
- Gisbrecht v. Barnhart, 535 U.S. 789, 800, 807-08 (2002)
- Rodriquez v. Brown, 865 F.2d 739, 746-47 (6th Cir. 1989)
- Hayes v. Secretary of HHS, 923 F.2d 418, 422 (6th Cir. 1990)
- Joseph J. Royzer v. Secretary of Health and Human Services, Royzer v. Secretary of HHS, 900 F.2d 981, 981-82 (6th Cir. 1990)
- Tucker v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec., 136 F.4th 639, 644-45, 648 (6th Cir. 2025)
- Jankovich v. Bowen, 868 F.2d 867, 871 n.1 (6th Cir. 1989)
- Twyla D. v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec., No. 3:19-cv-368, 2025 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 40825, at *4 (S.D. Ohio Mar. 6, 2025)
- Jay V.N.I. v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec., No. 3:20-cv-365, 2024 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 98031, at *4 (S.D. Ohio June 3, 2024)
- Martha G. v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec., No. 1:19-cv-936, 2023 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 63838, at *6-7 (S.D. Ohio Apr. 11, 2023), report and recommendation adopted by 2023 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 77738 (S.D. Ohio May 3, 2023)

OPINION

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF OHIO EASTERN DIVISION HILARY C.,: Case No. 2:23-cv-01089 Plaintiff,: Magistrate Judge Caroline H. Gentry: (upon full consent of the parties) vs.: COMMISSIONER OF THE SOCIAL: SECURITY ADMINISTRATION,: Defendant.: DECISION AND ORDER This matter comes before the Court upon Plaintiff's Motion for Attorney's Fees (Doc.

No. 14), which seeks an award of fees in the amount of \$2,195.00 pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 406(b)(1). The Commissioner's attorneys do not oppose the requested fee, explaining that "it is consistent with Section 406(b)'s requirements, is in accord with the fee agreement, and is otherwise reasonable." (Doc. No. 15, PageID# 1318.)

For the reasons set forth below, the Motion is GRANTED. I. BACKGROUND Previously in this Social Security appeal, the Court reversed the ALJ's non- disability finding and remanded this

case to the Commissioner under Sentence Four of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) for further proceedings. (Doc. No. 9.)

On remand, Plaintiff was awarded benefits. (Doc. No. 14-3.) Upon the Plaintiff's unopposed motion (Doc. No. 11), the Court previously awarded attorneys' fees to Plaintiff's counsel under the Equal Access to Justice Act ("EAJA"), 28 U.S.C. § 2142(d), in the amount of \$898.40. (Doc. No. 13.)

The Commissioner subsequently withheld \$7,200.00 for application toward a contingent fee award. (Doc. No. 14-3, PageID# 1305.) Plaintiff's counsel now seeks a contingency fee award under 42 U.S.C. § 406(b)(1) in the amount of \$2,195.00. (Doc. No. 14.) II. APPLICABLE LAW If a Social Security claimant obtains benefits after filing an appeal in this Court, then her counsel may ask the Court to award the amount of attorney's fees owed under a contingency fee agreement.

42 U.S.C. § 406(b)(1). The fee award may not exceed 25% of the past-due benefits, *id.*, and it must only compensate counsel for work performed in the federal court proceeding. *Horenstein v. Secretary of HHS*, 35 F.3d 261, 262 (6th Cir. 1994) (*en banc*).

The Commissioner routinely withholds up to 25% of a claimant's past-due benefits to pay for such a fee award. See 42 U.S.C. § 406(b)(1)(A) ("[T]he Commissioner ... 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.").

However, even if a claimant agrees to pay her counsel a contingency fee award in the amount of 25% of past-due benefits, that amount is not automatically awarded. Instead, Plaintiff's counsel must show, and the Court must find, that the requested fee award is reasonable for the services rendered. *Gisbrecht v. Barnhart*, 535 U.S. 789, 807 (2002) (noting the Social Security Act "does not displace contingen[cy]-fee agreements" but "calls for court review of such arrangements as an independent check, to assure that they yield reasonable results in particular cases.").

Therefore, a request for a contingency fee award in the amount of 25% of past-due benefits "is not to be viewed as *per se* reasonable," but instead shall be given "the weight ordinarily accorded a rebuttable presumption." *Rodriquez v. Brown*, 865 F.2d 739, 746 (6th Cir. 1989).

To assist the Court with assessing the reasonableness of a request for attorney's fees, counsel should submit a record of hours worked and a statement of his normal hourly billing rate for noncontingent-fee cases (if any). *Gisbrecht*, 535 U.S. at 808.

The Court may also consider evidence of the standard hourly rate for similar work performed in the relevant market. *Hayes v. Secretary of HHS*, 923 F.2d 418, 422 (6th Cir. 1990). But even fee

awards that reflect above-average hourly rates may be reasonable: It is not at all unusual for contingent fees to translate into large hourly rates

In assessing the reasonableness of a contingent fee award, we cannot ignore the fact that the attorney will not prevail every time. The hourly rate in the next contingent fee case will be zero, unless benefits are awarded. Contingent fees generally overcompensate in some cases and undercompensate in others. It is the nature of the beast. *Royzer v. Secretary of HHS*, 900 F.2d 981, 981-82 (6th Cir.

1990). Thus, the rule in the Sixth Circuit is that “[a] hypothetical hourly rate that is less than twice the standard rate is per se reasonable, and a hypothetical hourly rate that is equal to or greater than twice the standard rate may well be reasonable.” *Hayes*, 923 F.2d at 422. Notably, “a high effective hourly rate cannot on its own justify reducing a fee award—district courts must provide additional reasoning.” *Tucker v. Comm’r of Soc.*

Sec., 136 F.4th 639, 644 (6th Cir. 2025) (emphasis in original). Therefore, in addition to “consider[ing] the effective hourly rate in weighing reasonableness,” *id.*, the Court will consider whether the requested fee should be reduced for other reasons.

For example, there may be evidence that counsel acted improperly or would receive a windfall due to the discrepancy between relatively few hours worked and a sizeable award of past-due benefits. *Gisbrecht*, 535 U.S. at 808; *Rodriquez*, 865 F.2d at 746.

The Court will consider the complexity and difficulty of the case, the results achieved, and whether any remand to the Commissioner was the result of a joint stipulation or a court order. *Tucker*, 136 F.4th at 644-45, 648.

Finally, the Court will consider this guidance from the Sixth Circuit: Although we recognize that there are cases where the lawyer’s unusual skill or diligence wins the case, typically the number of hours that are required to prosecute an appeal from the Secretary’s determination will not vary greatly and will bear little if any relationship to the results achieved.

Where a case has been submitted on boilerplate pleadings, in which no issues of material fact are present and where no legal research is apparent, the benchmark twenty-five percent of awards fee would obviously be inappropriate.

The reviewing courts should not hesitate to make reductions in such situations, and at the other end of the spectrum should only allow maximum fees for extensive effort on the part of counsel who have overcome legal and factual obstacles to the enhancement of the benefits awarded to his client. *Rodriquez*, 865 F.2d at 747.

After determining the amount of a reasonable contingency fee award under the Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. § 406(b)(1), the Court will order counsel to refund to Plaintiff all fees previously

awarded under the EAJA. See *Jankovich v. Bowen*, 868 F.2d 867, 871 n.1 (6th Cir. 1989). III. ANALYSIS OF PLAINTIFF’S MOTION As instructed by *Gisbrecht* and *Rodriquez*, the Court begins its analysis with the text of the contingency fee agreement.

It provides, in relevant part: I understand that if my federal court attorney wins my case in federal court ... my federal court attorney will petition for an award of attorney fees for work performed at the federal court(s) pursuant to the Equal Access to Justice Act (“EAJA”).... I hereby assign any court-awarded EAJA attorney fees to my federal court attorney.

I agree that any such payment belongs to my federal court attorney.... I understand that my federal court attorney also has the right to ask the court to award 25% of my past-due benefits (“406(b) fees”) for representing me in federal court.

The parties agree that if counsel becomes entitled to a fee up to 25% of the past due benefits for work before the court ... that counsel will credit the amount of the EAJA fee in addition to the 406(b) fee and will return any excess EAJA amounts not authorized, to the claimant. (Doc. No. 14-2, PageID# 1300.) “Contingent-fee contracts ... [at] the 25 percent ceiling ... are the most common fee arrangement between attorneys and Social Security claimants.” *Gisbrecht*, 535 U.S. at 800.

Although this Court “is not bound to award recovery according to the stated [25% fee] agreement,” the Court “should give close attention” to the agreement and treat it as a rebuttable presumption. *Rodriquez*, 865 F.2d at 746. Plaintiff’s counsel provided documentation of the hours spent working on the federal case by Plaintiff’s attorneys and paralegals. (Doc.

No. 14-4, PageID# 1311-1316). Attorney Richard Brian states that Plaintiff’s attorneys worked 2.5 hours, and paralegals worked 4.0 hours, for a total of 6.5 hours worked on Plaintiff’s case. (Doc. No. 14-1, PageID# 1297.) Counsel applied a paralegal hourly rate of \$80.00 and a hypothetical attorney hourly rate of \$750.00 to arrive at the total amount sought of \$2,195.00.

(*Id.*) Plaintiff’s counsel also submitted documentation that shows Plaintiff was awarded past-due benefits in the amount of \$65,342.00. (Doc. No. 14-3, PageID# 1305.) Although the contingency fee agreement permits counsel to seek fees in an amount equivalent to 25% of those past-due benefits—which is \$16,335.50—counsel is instead seeking only \$2,195.00, which is approximately 3.4% of the past-due benefit award.

(Doc. No. 14-1, PageID# 1297.) After reviewing the materials submitted by counsel, the Court concludes that the hypothetical hourly rate of \$750.00 is reasonable for the work performed in this case, and that the requested fee award of \$2,195.00 is also reasonable.

First, as noted above, there is a rebuttable presumption that a 25% contingency fee agreement is reasonable. The Court finds that counsel’s request for only 3.4% of the past- due benefit award is

reasonable given that relatively few hours were worked in this case, and it does not amount to a windfall.

Second, the hypothetical attorney hourly rate is more than reasonable in light of the skill and experience of Plaintiff's counsel. Third, counsel's hypothetical hourly rate of \$750.00 fits comfortably within the range of fees that judges in this district have found reasonable. See *Twyla D. v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec.*, No. 3:19-cv-368, 2025 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 40825, at *4 (S.D.

Ohio Mar. 6, 2025) (Silvain, MJ) (awarding hypothetical attorney hourly rate of \$728.60 to attorney Michael Rake); *Jay V.N.I. v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec.*, No. 3:20-cv-365, 2024 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 98031, at *4 (S.D. Ohio June 3, 2024) (Silvain, MJ) (awarding hypothetical attorney hourly rate of \$814.74 to attorney Richard Brian); *Martha G. v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec.*, No. 1:19-cv-936, 2023 U.S. Dist.

LEXIS 63838, at *6-7 (S.D. Ohio Apr. 11, 2023) (Bowman, MJ) (awarding hypothetical attorney hourly rate of \$869.56 to attorney Edward Ahlers), report and recommendation adopted by 2023 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 77738 (S.D. Ohio, May 3, 2023) (Barrett, DJ). Fourth, after reviewing the submitted billing record, the Court finds no indication that the time expended by Plaintiff's counsel was excessive or improperly charged.

Fifth, the Court has reviewed the proceedings in this case to assess their complexity and difficulty, the results achieved, and whether the case was remanded to the Commissioner because of a joint stipulation or a court order. *Tucker*, 136 F.4th at 644-45, 648.

The docket shows that shortly after the Commissioner filed the administrative record, the parties jointly stipulated to a remand of this case to the Commissioner. (Doc. Nos. 7 & 8.) Plaintiff's counsel achieved excellent results in an economical fashion and there is no basis to reduce the attorney's fees requested in this case. Sixth, given the substantial risk undertaken by Plaintiff's counsel in accepting Social Security cases on a contingent fee basis, the undersigned finds that an award of \$2,195.00 in this case is reasonable.

Finally, counsel represents that the EAJA fee amount that was previously awarded will be refunded to Plaintiff to prevent a double recovery of fees. (Doc. No. 14-1, PageID# 1298.) IV. CONCLUSION Upon review of Plaintiff's Motion and the supporting evidence, as well as the relevant legal authority, the Court finds that the requested fee award is reasonable.

Accordingly, the Court ORDERS as follows: 1. The Motion for Attorney's Fees (Doc. No. 14) is GRANTED. 2. Plaintiff's counsel is AWARDED attorney's fees pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 406(b)(1) in the amount of \$2,195.00. The Commissioner shall REMIT this sum to Plaintiff's counsel from Plaintiff's past-due benefits that were withheld. 3. Plaintiff's counsel shall REMIT to Plaintiff, within fourteen (14) days of his receipt of this attorney's fee award, the prior EAJA award of \$898.40.

4. The Commissioner shall RELEASE to Plaintiff the remaining funds, if any, that were withheld from her award of past-due benefits to pay her attorney's fees. 5. This case remains terminated on the docket of this Court. IT IS SO ORDERED. Date: January 13, 2026 /s/ Caroline H. Gentry
Caroline H. Gentry UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE

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