

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF
ARKANSAS, FAYETTEVILLE DIVISION

Beau Harlen, o/b/o Brandon B. McCusker, (deceased) v. Frank
Bisignano, Commissioner, Social Security Administration

Harlen · No. 5:25-cv-05081 · Decided January 15, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Western District of Arkansas reviewed a denial of Disability Insurance Benefits under the Social Security Act. The court held that the Administrative Law Judge's residual functional capacity determination and evaluation of the claimant's impairments were supported by substantial evidence, summarily affirmed the administrative decision, and dismissed the complaint with prejudice.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Western District of Arkansas, Fayetteville Division
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Spencer G. Singleton, United States Magistrate Judge
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Western District of Arkansas, Fayetteville Division
DECIDED	January 15, 2026
DOCKET	5:25-cv-05081
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Judicial review under 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) of the Commissioner of Social Security's final decision denying Disability Insurance Benefits.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court reviews whether the Commissioner's findings are supported by substantial evidence on the record as a whole. The decision must be affirmed if substantial evidence supports it, even if substantial evidence could also support a contrary result or the court would have reached a different conclusion.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished district court memorandum opinion
PARTIES	Beau Harlen, on behalf of Brandon B. McCusker, deceased v. Frank Bisignano, Commissioner, Social Security Administration

TOPICS

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PRACTICE AREAS

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether substantial evidence supported the ALJ's residual functional capacity determination.
2. Whether the ALJ erred by failing to evaluate whether McCusker's prior MRSA infection contributed to his cause of death.

HOLDINGS

1. The ALJ's residual functional capacity determination was supported by substantial evidence, and the plaintiff failed to demonstrate greater limitations.
2. The ALJ did not commit reversible error because the record contained no objective evidence that the prior MRSA infection contributed to McCusker's death from aspiration pneumonia.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"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."

"The Court has reviewed the entire transcript and the parties' briefs."

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

McCusker alleged disability from knee pain, back pain, depression, and anxiety beginning June 5, 2018. The ALJ found severe impairments consisting of depression or bipolar disorder, personality disorder, and substance use disorder, but determined that McCusker retained the residual functional capacity to perform work at all exertional levels with restrictions on interaction and workplace changes. The ALJ concluded that jobs existed in significant numbers in the national economy that McCusker could perform. Harlen also argued that a prior MRSA infection may have contributed to McCusker's death from aspiration pneumonia, but the record contained no objective evidence supporting that contention.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Brandson B. McCusker applied for Disability Insurance Benefits in 2019, alleging disability beginning June 5, 2018. After McCusker died while the application was pending, his father, Beau Harlen, was substituted as the party plaintiff. Following administrative hearings, the ALJ issued an unfavorable decision on April 3, 2024. Harlen appealed to the district court, and both parties filed briefs. The court summarily affirmed the ALJ's decision and dismissed the complaint with prejudice.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Ramirez v. Barnhart, 292 F.3d 576, 583 (8th Cir. 2002)
- Johnson v. Apfel, 240 F.3d 1145, 1147 (8th Cir. 2001)
- Haley v. Massanari, 258 F.3d 742, 747 (8th Cir. 2001)
- Young v. Apfel, 221 F.3d 1065, 1068 (8th Cir. 2000)
- Cox v. Apfel, 160 F.3d 1203, 1206 (8th Cir. 1998)
- Edwards v. Barnhart, 314 F.3d 964, 966 (8th Cir. 2003)
- Sledge v. Astrue, 364 Fed. Appx. 307 (8th Cir. 2010)

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