

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE DISTRICT OF MARYLAND

Cleta S. v. Frank Bisignano, Commissioner of Social Security

Civil No. TJS-25-434 (D. Md. Feb. 23, 2026) · No. Civil No. TJS-25-434 · Decided February 23, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the District of Maryland reviewed the denial of Cleta S.'s applications for disability insurance benefits and Supplemental Security Income. The court held that the Administrative Law Judge failed to perform the function-by-function residual functional capacity assessment required by SSR 96-8p and that the deficiency frustrated meaningful judicial review. The court denied both parties' motions for summary judgment, reversed the Commissioner's decision in part, and remanded for further proceedings under sentence four of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g).

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the District of Maryland
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Timothy J. Sullivan
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the District of Maryland
DECIDED	February 23, 2026
DOCKET	Civil No. TJS-25-434
DISPOSITION	reversed_and_remanded
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Cleta S. sought judicial review under 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) of the Commissioner’s denial of her claims for disability insurance benefits and Supplemental Security Income. The parties filed cross-motions for summary judgment, and the case was referred to the magistrate judge with their consent.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court must uphold the agency decision if it is supported by substantial evidence and the agency applied the proper legal standards. The court reviews the ALJ’s reasoning and may not construct an analysis that the ALJ failed to provide.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unknown; district court letter opinion with no reported citation
PARTIES	Cleta S. v. Frank Bisignano, Commissioner of Social Security

TOPICS

- judicial review of agency action
- administrative law
- summary judgment
- remedies
- civil procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

Social Security disability

administrative law

civil procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the ALJ adequately evaluated the claimant's residual functional capacity by conducting the required function-by-function assessment of her work-related physical and mental abilities.
2. Whether the ALJ's RFC determination was supported by substantial evidence and explained sufficiently to permit meaningful judicial review.
3. Whether the court should address the claimant's remaining challenges to the Commissioner's decision.

HOLDINGS

1. The ALJ failed to conduct the required function-by-function assessment of the claimant's work-related abilities. Merely evaluating symptoms and assigning a general RFC category, such as light work, does not satisfy the requirement to explain the claimant's capacity for functions including lifting, carrying, pushing, pulling, sitting, standing, and walking.
2. The claimant was not required to identify evidence that would necessarily compel a more restrictive RFC because the ALJ's failure to follow the function-by-function framework itself frustrated meaningful judicial review.
3. The court declined to reach the claimant's remaining arguments because the inadequate RFC analysis independently required remand.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"The Court cannot supply a function-by-function analysis that the ALJ did not perform and then review the analysis as though it was written by the ALJ. This Court's role is to review the ALJ's reasoning, not to construct it in the first instance."

"The ALJ's failure to follow the function-by-function framework frustrates the Court's ability to conduct the required review."

"Because the ALJ did not perform a function-by-function assessment, the Court cannot find that the RFC determination is supported by substantial evidence."

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Cleta S. applied for disability insurance benefits and Supplemental Security Income based on an alleged disability onset date of April 8, 2015. The ALJ found severe physical and mental impairments, including obesity, lumbar degenerative disc disease with radiculopathy, bilateral knee degenerative joint disease, eye disease, Graves' disease, migraine, panic disorder, OCD, PTSD, and major depressive disorder. The ALJ found that she could perform light work with additional restrictions and could perform several jobs existing in significant numbers in the national economy, but the court found that the ALJ did not explain how the claimant's symptoms translated into the specific functional limitations in the RFC.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Plaintiff filed applications for DIB and SSI alleging disability beginning April 8, 2015. After three administrative hearings and three unfavorable ALJ decisions, the Appeals Council denied review following the third decision. The case had previously been remanded twice by the District of Maryland for further proceedings. On the third judicial review, the court denied both parties' summary-judgment motions, reversed the Commissioner's decision in part for inadequate analysis, and remanded for further proceedings.

DISPOSITION

reversed_and_remanded

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

The Commissioner must conduct further proceedings consistent with the opinion, including a proper function-by-function assessment of the claimant's physical and mental work-related abilities and a narrative explanation connecting the evidence to each RFC limitation.

CASES CITED

- Mascio v. Colvin, 780 F.3d 632, 634 (4th Cir. 2015)
- Melkonyan v. Sullivan, 501 U.S. 89 (1991)
- Cleta S. v. Saul, No. CBD-19-2906, 2020 WL 6565250 (D. Md. Nov. 9, 2020)
- Dowling v. Comm'r, Soc. Sec. Admin., 986 F.3d 377, 387 (4th Cir. 2021)
- Thomas v. Berryhill, 916 F.3d 307, 311 (4th Cir. 2019), as amended (Feb. 22, 2019)
- Reid v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec., 769 F.3d 861, 865 (4th Cir. 2014)
- Nicole C. v. Kijakazi, No. JMC-22-2123, 2023 WL 4027481 (D. Md. June 15, 2023)
- Henderson v. Kijakazi, No. AAQ-20-3346, 2022 WL 1555408 (D. Md. May 17, 2022)
- Nancy G. v. Kijakazi, No. GLS-20-3440, 2022 WL 363824 (D. Md. Feb. 4, 2022)