

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Karen Bell v. Commissioner of Social Security

Bell · No. 1:21-cv-00786-HBK · Decided August 26, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California granted Karen Bell’s motion for attorney’s fees under 42 U.S.C. § 406(b) following a successful Social Security disability benefits claim and sentence-four remand. The court awarded \$26,947.23 and required counsel to refund \$6,522.02 previously awarded under the Equal Access to Justice Act.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Helena M. Barch-Kuchta
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
DECIDED	August 26, 2025
DOCKET	1:21-cv-00786-HBK
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Plaintiff's counsel moved for attorney's fees under 42 U.S.C. § 406(b) after the court granted a sentence-four voluntary remand in the underlying Social Security action and the Commissioner awarded Plaintiff retroactive benefits. The court granted the fee motion subject to an offset for previously awarded EAJA fees.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court independently evaluates whether the requested § 406(b) fee is reasonable, considering the fee agreement, the results achieved, counsel's experience, the time expended, and whether the hours or hourly rate were artificially inflated.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished, nonprecedential district-court order

TOPICS

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

PRACTICE AREAS

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether counsel's requested \$26,947.23 fee under 42 U.S.C. § 406(b) was reasonable and within the statutory 25-percent limit.
2. Whether the § 406(b) award had to be offset by the \$6,522.02 previously awarded under the Equal Access to Justice Act.

HOLDINGS

1. The requested \$26,947.23 fee was reasonable and appropriate under 42 U.S.C. § 406(b).
2. Counsel must refund \$6,522.02 to Bell as an offset for the EAJA fees previously awarded.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“For the reasons set forth below, Plaintiff’s motion for attorney’s fees is granted in the amount of \$26,947.23 subject to an offset of \$6,522.02 in fees previously awarded on March 6, 2023, under the Equal Access to Justice Act (EAJA), 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d).” (at 1)

“Counsel still bears the burden, however, of showing the requested fees are reasonable.” (at 2)

“Counsel shall refund to Plaintiff \$6,522.02 of the § 406(b) fees awarded as an offset for the EAJA fees previously awarded pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d).” (at 4)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Counsel represented Bell in obtaining a sentence-four remand of her Social Security claim. On remand, the Commissioner found Bell disabled beginning in September 2017 and awarded \$107,788.92 in retroactive benefits. Bell's contingency-fee agreement allowed counsel to retain 25 percent of past-due benefits, and counsel submitted records showing 27.9 hours of attorney work. The requested § 406(b) fee was \$26,947.23, with a required \$6,522.02 refund offset for previously awarded EAJA fees.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Bell filed an action seeking judicial review of the denial of supplemental security income and disability insurance benefits. On November 8, 2022, the court granted the parties' stipulation for voluntary remand under sentence four of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g). On remand, the Commissioner found Bell disabled beginning in September 2017 and awarded \$107,788.92 in retroactive benefits. The court had previously awarded \$6,522.02 in EAJA fees, and counsel then sought \$26,947.23 under § 406(b).

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- *Gisbrecht v. Barnhart*, 535 U.S. 789, 796 (2002)
- *Biggerstaff v. Saul*, 840 F. App'x 69, 70-71 (9th Cir. 2020)
- *Crawford v. Astrue*, 586 F.3d 1142, 1147, 1151, 1153 (9th Cir. 2009)
- *Parrish v. Commissioner of Social Security Administration*, 698 F.3d 1215, 1219 (9th Cir. 2012)
- *Mayfield v. Commissioner of Social Security*, No. 1:16-cv-01084-SAB, ECF No. 24 at 5 (E.D. Cal. March 19, 2020)

OPINION

(SS) *Bell v. Commissioner of Social Security*

PER CURIAM.

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8 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

9 FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

10 11 KAREN BELL, Case No. 1:21-cv-00786-HBK 12 Plaintiff, ORDER GRANTING
PLAINTIFF'S MOTION

FOR ATTORNEY'S FEES PURSUANT TO 42

13 v. U.S.C. § 406(b)1

14 COMMISSIONER OF SOCIAL (Doc. No. 24)

SECURITY,

15 Defendant. 16

17 18 Jonathan O. Peña ("Counsel") of Peña & Bromberg, PC, attorney for Karen Bell 19
("Plaintiff"), filed a motion seeking attorney's fees pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 406(b) on July 31, 20
2025. (Doc. No. 24). Plaintiff was served with the motion and advised she had 14 days to object.
21 (Id. at 1, 9). No opposition has been filed as of the date of this Order. (See docket). For the 22
reasons set forth below, Plaintiff's motion for attorney's fees is granted in the amount of 23
\$26,947.23 subject to an offset of \$6,522.02 in fees previously awarded on March 6, 2023, under
24 the Equal Access to Justice Act (EAJA), 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d). (Doc. No. 23). 25 //// 26 1 Both
parties have consented to the jurisdiction of a magistrate judge in accordance with 28 U.S.C. 27
§636(c)(1). (Doc. No. 9). 28

1 I. BACKGROUND

2 On May 14, 2021, Plaintiff brought the underlying action seeking judicial review of a 3 final
administrative decision denying Plaintiff's claim for supplemental security income and 4 disability
insurance benefits under the Social Security Act. (Doc. No. 1). On November 8, 2022, 5 the Court
granted the parties' stipulation to a voluntary remand pursuant to sentence four of 42 6 U.S.C. §
405(g). (Doc. Nos. 19, 20). The Court entered an award of \$6,522.02 for attorney fees 7 under the
Equal Access to Justice Act ("EAJA") on March 6, 2023. (Doc. Nos. 22, 23). 8 On remand, the
Commissioner found Plaintiff disabled beginning in September 2017. 9 (Doc. No. 24-1 at 1).
Plaintiff was awarded \$107,788.92 in retroactive benefits.2 (Id. at 5). On

10 October 17, 2024, Counsel filed this motion for attorney's fees in the amount of \$26,947.23 with

11 an offset of \$6,522.02 for EAJA fees already awarded. (Doc. No. 24 at 1-2). Counsel argues 12 these fees are reasonable because the contingency fee agreement, which Plaintiff signed, permits 13 Counsel to retain 25% of the past-due benefits, and the requested amount is reasonable. (Doc. 14 No. 24 at 3-6; Doc. No. 24-2). Defendant did not file any response to the fee requested, and time

15 to do so has expired. (See docket).

16 II. APPLICABLE LAW

17 Attorneys may seek a reasonable fee under the Social Security Act for cases in which they 18 have successfully represented social security claimants. Section 406(b) allows: 19 Whenever a court renders a judgment favorable to a claimant under this subchapter who was represented before the court by an attorney, 20 the court may determine and allow as part of its judgment a reasonable fee for such representation, not in excess of 25 percent of 21 the total of the past-due benefits to which the claimant is entitled.... 22 42 U.S.C. § 406(b)(1)(A). Counsel for a plaintiff may recover attorneys' fees under both 23 U.S.C. § 406(b) and EAJA. *Gisbrecht v. Barnhart*, 535 U.S. 789, 796 (2002). Counsel, however, 24 must refund to the plaintiff the amount of the smaller fee. *Id.* 25 Fees in social security cases "are usually set in contingency-fee agreements and are 26 payable from past-due benefits awarded to the claimant." *Biggerstaff v. Saul*, 840 F. App'x 69, 70 27 2 Plaintiff noted this amount is not included in the notice of award; rather, Plaintiff calculated the amount 28 by multiplying the 25% of past due benefits amount by four \$26,947.23 x 4). (Doc. No. 24 at 3). 1 (9th Cir. 2020). The fee is not borne by the Commissioner. *Crawford v. Astrue*, 586 F.3d 1142, 2 1147 (9th Cir. 2009). This provision's purpose is in part to "ensure that attorneys representing 3 successful claimants would not risk nonpayment of [appropriate] fees." *Gisbrecht*, 535 U.S. at 4 805 (internal quotations omitted). When weighing the adequacy of requested attorney's fees, 5 Courts should respect "the primacy of lawful attorney-client fee agreements." *Id.* at 793. 6 Counsel still bears the burden, however, of showing the requested fees are reasonable. *Id.* at 807. 7 In determining reasonableness, the court may consider the experience of the attorney, the results 8 they achieved, and whether there is evidence the attorney artificially increased the hours worked 9 or the hourly rate charged. *Id.* at 807-808; *Crawford*, 586 F.3d at 1151. Generally, any 406(b) 10 award is offset by attorney fees granted under the EAJA. *Parrish v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec. Admin.*, 11 698 F.3d 1215, 1219 (9th Cir. 2012)

12 III. ANALYSIS

13 Here, Plaintiff signed a fee agreement agreeing to pay Counsel 25% of past due benefits 14 awarded to Plaintiff. (Doc. No. 24-2). Counsel was ultimately successful in securing 15 \$107,788.92 in retroactive benefits for Plaintiff. (Doc. No. 24-1 at 3). In support of this motion, 16 Counsel submitted a time sheet indicating the firm expended 27.9 hours in attorney time on this 17 matter. (Doc. No. 24-3). The time Counsel spent in successfully attaining Plaintiff's benefits 18

does not appear inflated. 19 Counsel's request for \$26,947.23 in fees for 27.9 hours of work results in an hourly rate of 20 \$965.85 for the attorney work. (Doc. No. 24 at 5). Considering the effective rate of both attorney 21 and paralegal hours in cases involving social security contingency fee arrangements this rate 22 appears consistent with those approved by Ninth Circuit courts. Crawford v. Astrue, 586 F.3d 23 1142, 1153 (9th Cir. 2009) (explaining that the majority opinion found reasonable effective 24 hourly rates equaling \$519.00, \$875.00, and \$902.00) (J. Clifton, concurring in part and 25 dissenting in part); Mayfield v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec., No. 1:16-cv-01084-SAB, ECF No. 24 at 5 26 (E.D. Cal. March 19, 2020) (approving hours rate of \$1,025.22 for paralegal and attorney time); 27 Biggerstaff v. Saul, 840 Fed. App'x 69, 71 (9th Cir. 2020) (affirming \$1,400.00 per hour for 28 combined attorney and paralegal work). Attorney hourly rates inevitably rise as their experience 1 | increases, and Counsel has been practicing social security law for more than 13 years. (Doc. No. 2 | 24 at 7). Based on the foregoing, the Court finds the requested fees of \$26,947.23 are reasonable. 3 | Gisbrecht, 535 U.S. at 807-08. 4 An award of attorney's fees pursuant to 406(b) in the amount of \$26,947.23 is, therefore, 5 | appropriate. An award of § 406(b) fees, however, must be offset by any prior award of attorneys' 6 | fees granted under the EAJA. 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d); Gisbrecht, 535 U.S. 796. As Plaintiff was 7 | previously awarded \$6,522.02 in fees pursuant to the EAJA, Counsel shall refund this amount to 8 | Plaintiff. 9 Accordingly, it is ORDERED: 10 1. Plaintiff's Counsel's motion for an award of attorney's fees under § 406(b) (Doc. No. 11 24) is GRANTED. 12 2. Plaintiff's Counsel is awarded \$26,947.23 in attorney fees pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 13 406(b). 14 3. Counsel shall refund to Plaintiff \$6,522.02 of the § 406(b) fees awarded as an offset 15 for the EAJA fees previously awarded pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d). 16 '7 | Dated: _ August 25, 2025 Mihaw. Wh. foareh Zaskth

18 HELENA M. BARCH-KUCHTA

9 UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE

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