

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE DISTRICT OF HAWAI‘I

Liona Nelson Kapoi v. Frank Bisignano, Commissioner of Social Security Administration

Kapoi · No. Civil No. 25-00363 MWJS-RT · Decided February 25, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the District of Hawai‘i reviews the denial of Liona Nelson Kapoi’s applications for Social Security disability and disability insurance benefits. The court holds that the Administrative Law Judge failed to provide specific, clear, and convincing reasons for rejecting Kapoi’s testimony concerning the severity of his mental health symptoms. The court reverses the Commissioner’s decision and remands for further administrative proceedings.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the District of Hawai‘i
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Micah W.J. Smith
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the District of Hawai‘i
DECIDED	February 25, 2026
DOCKET	Civil No. 25-00363 MWJS-RT
DISPOSITION	reversed_and_remanded
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Judicial review of the Commissioner of Social Security's final decision denying applications for Social Security disability and disability insurance benefits.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The Commissioner's disability determination must be affirmed unless it is unsupported by substantial evidence or based on legal error. The court reviews only the reasons and factual findings actually offered by the ALJ and may not rely on post hoc rationalizations.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unknown; the provided metadata identifies the precedential status as Unknown, and no reporter citation appears.
PARTIES	Liona Nelson Kapoi v. Frank Bisignano, Commissioner of Social Security Administration

TOPICS

- judicial review of agency action
- agency adjudication
- administrative law
- ada / disability

PRACTICE AREAS

Social Security

administrative law

disability benefits

judicial review of agency action

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the ALJ provided specific, clear, and convincing reasons for rejecting Kapoi's subjective testimony concerning the severity of his mental-health symptoms.
2. Whether the district court could affirm the Commissioner's decision based on a treatment-noncompliance rationale that the ALJ did not state in the decision.

HOLDINGS

1. An ALJ may reject such testimony only by offering specific, clear, and convincing reasons.
2. The ALJ did not provide legally sufficient reasons for rejecting Kapoi's testimony because merely stating that mental-status examinations were generally normal, without explaining how they contradicted the testimony, was inadequate.
3. The court could not affirm on that basis because the ALJ did not rely on treatment noncompliance to reject Kapoi's mental-health symptom testimony, and the Commissioner's proposed evidence concerned ankle treatment rather than mental-health treatment.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“When the Commissioner finds that a claimant is not malingering but instead has a severe impairment “which might reasonably produce the pain or other symptoms alleged,” the Commissioner can “reject the claimant’s testimony about the severity of [their] symptoms only by offering specific, clear and convincing reasons for doing so.”” (Discussion)

“Long-standing principles of administrative law require us to review the ALJ’s decision based on the reasoning and factual findings offered by the ALJ—not post hoc rationalizations that attempt to intuit what the adjudicator may have been thinking.” (Discussion)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Kapoi applied for Social Security disability and disability insurance benefits, alleging disability beginning July 28, 2019. He testified that bipolar disorder and other mental-health conditions caused disassociation, severe concentration problems, fluctuating symptoms, and difficulty interacting with others, including family members. The ALJ found severe physical and mental impairments, including bipolar disorder, but rejected the asserted severity of Kapoi's mental-health symptoms and found that he could perform sedentary work with limitations. The ALJ did not identify specific contradictions between the testimony and medical evidence and did not rely on alleged noncompliance with treatment as a reason for rejecting the mental-health testimony.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Kapoi applied for disability and disability insurance benefits, and an ALJ denied the applications after a hearing. The Appeals Council denied review, making the ALJ's decision the Commissioner's final decision. Kapoi timely appealed to the district court, which reversed and remanded for further administrative proceedings.

DISPOSITION

reversed_and_remanded

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

Remand for further administrative proceedings consistent with the order, including reconsideration of the rejection of Kapoi's testimony concerning the severity of his mental-health symptoms. The ALJ may address the effect of prior benefit denials if relevant, but must provide legally sufficient reasoning.

CASES CITED

- Brown-Hunter v. Colvin, 806 F.3d 487, 492-93 (9th Cir. 2015)
- Luther v. Berryhill, 891 F.3d 872, 875 (9th Cir. 2018)
- Woods v. Kijakazi, 32 F.4th 785, 788 (9th Cir. 2022)
- Bray v. Commissioner of Social Security Administration, 554 F.3d 1219, 1225-26 (9th Cir. 2009)
- Orn v. Astrue, 495 F.3d 625, 630, 635 (9th Cir. 2007)
- Reddick v. Chater, 157 F.3d 715, 722 (9th Cir. 1998)
- Bunnell v. Sullivan, 947 F.2d 341, 343 (9th Cir. 1991) (en banc)
- Ferguson v. O'Malley, 95 F.4th 1194, 1200 (9th Cir. 2024)
- Smartt v. Kijakazi, 53 F.4th 489, 498-99 (9th Cir. 2022)
- Carmickle v. Commissioner, Social Security Administration, 533 F.3d 1155, 1161 (9th Cir. 2008)
- Fair v. Bowen, 885 F.2d 597, 603-04 (9th Cir. 1989)
- Hiler v. Astrue, 687 F.3d 1208, 1212 (9th Cir. 2012)