

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE CENTRAL DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Steven S. M. v. Frank Bisignano

Steven S. M. · No. 2:24-cv-06995 ADS · Decided September 17, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Central District of California reviews a denial of disability insurance benefits under the Social Security Act. The court rejects challenges concerning development of the record, the residual functional capacity assessment, application of the Medical-Vocational Guidelines, step-five vocational findings, and evaluation of subjective symptom testimony. The Commissioner's decision is affirmed and the action is dismissed with prejudice.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Central District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Autumn D. Spaeth
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Central District of California
DECIDED	September 17, 2025
DOCKET	2:24-cv-06995 ADS
DISPOSITION	dismissed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Judicial review under 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) of the Commissioner's denial of an application for disability insurance benefits.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court reviews the Commissioner's decision under 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) to determine whether it is supported by substantial evidence and whether the proper legal standards were applied. The court may not substitute its judgment for the ALJ's when the evidence is susceptible to more than one rational interpretation, and may affirm on harmless-error grounds when an error is inconsequential to the ultimate nondisability determination.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unpublished, nonprecedential district-court opinion
PARTIES	Steven S. M. v. Frank Bisignano, Commissioner of Social Security

TOPICS

- judicial review of agency action
- administrative law
- disability definition

PRACTICE AREAS

Social Security disability

administrative law

judicial review of agency action

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the ALJ failed to fully and fairly develop the administrative record by not obtaining additional Kaiser records and by failing to properly consider a post-decision VA functional capacity evaluation.
2. Whether the ALJ's residual functional capacity assessment failed to account for the combined effects of Plaintiff's impairments, including obesity, lumbar radiculopathy, migraines, and leukoencephalopathy.
3. Whether the ALJ improperly applied the Medical-Vocational Guidelines by considering Plaintiff's age at the alleged onset date rather than at the time of the decision.
4. Whether the ALJ properly identified other work available in significant numbers in the national economy at step five.
5. Whether the ALJ provided legally sufficient reasons for discounting Plaintiff's subjective symptom testimony.

HOLDINGS

1. The ALJ did not violate the duty to fully and fairly develop the record because the evidence was neither ambiguous nor inadequate for evaluating Plaintiff's claim. The brief reference to older Kaiser records did not trigger further development, and the post-decision VA functional capacity evaluation was not shown to relate to the period under review or to be material.
2. The ALJ's residual functional capacity assessment was supported by substantial evidence and adequately accounted for the limitations established by the record.
3. Any error in considering Plaintiff's age at the alleged onset date rather than at the time of the ALJ's decision was harmless and did not warrant remand.
4. The ALJ did not err at step five in finding that Plaintiff could perform jobs existing in significant numbers in the national economy.
5. The ALJ provided legally sufficient reasons for discounting Plaintiff's subjective symptom testimony, including evidence of malingering, inconsistencies in Plaintiff's statements, and activities inconsistent with the alleged severity of his limitations.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"The District Court is not a trier of the facts but is confined to ascertaining by the record before it if the Commissioner's decision is based upon substantial evidence." (IV.B)

"Social Security proceedings are inquisitorial rather than adversarial. It is the ALJ's duty to investigate the facts and develop the arguments both for and against granting benefits." (IV.C.1)

"The standard isn't whether [the federal] court is convinced, but instead whether the ALJ's rationale is clear enough that it has the power to convince." (IV.G.1)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Plaintiff, born in 1961, has a bachelor's degree in engineering and previously worked as a logistics engineer. He suffered a stroke in late 2020 and alleged cognitive, psychiatric, physical, pain, fatigue, sensory, and mobility-related symptoms. The ALJ found severe residual vascular neurocognitive impairment, recurrent major depressive disorder, and generalized anxiety disorder, but determined that Plaintiff retained the residual functional capacity for work at all exertional levels with restrictions to simple instructions and decisions, limited workplace interaction, frequent routine changes, and avoidance of hazards. Relying on vocational-expert testimony, the ALJ found that Plaintiff could perform work as a polisher, hand packer, or vehicle cleaner.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Plaintiff applied for disability insurance benefits alleging disability beginning December 17, 2020. The application was denied initially and on reconsideration; after a hearing, the ALJ found Plaintiff not disabled, and the Appeals Council denied review. Plaintiff filed this action, and the parties consented to magistrate-judge jurisdiction under 28 U.S.C. § 636(c). The court affirmed the Commissioner's decision and dismissed the action with prejudice.

DISPOSITION

dismissed

CASES CITED

- Garrison v. Colvin, 759 F.3d 995, 1010 (9th Cir. 2014)
- Connett v. Barnhart, 340 F.3d 871, 874 (9th Cir. 2003)
- Mayes v. Massanari, 276 F.3d 453, 458-60 (9th Cir. 2002)
- Reddick v. Chater, 157 F.3d 715, 722, 725 (9th Cir. 1998)
- Aukland v. Massanari, 257 F.3d 1033, 1035 (9th Cir. 2001)
- Ryan v. Commissioner, 528 F.3d 1194, 1198 (9th Cir. 2008)
- Burch v. Barnhart, 400 F.3d 676, 679 (9th Cir. 2005)
- Robbins v. Social Security Administration, 466 F.3d 880, 882 (9th Cir. 2006)
- Orn v. Astrue, 495 F.3d 625, 630 (9th Cir. 2007)
- Brown-Hunter v. Colvin, 806 F.3d 487, 492-94 (9th Cir. 2015)
- Molina v. Astrue, 674 F.3d 1104, 1115 (9th Cir. 2012)
- O'Brien v. Bisignano, 142 F.4th 687, 699 (9th Cir. 2025)
- Sims v. Apfel, 530 U.S. 103, 110-11 (2000)
- Celaya v. Halter, 332 F.3d 1177, 1183 (9th Cir. 2003)
- Brown v. Heckler, 713 F.2d 441, 443 (9th Cir. 1983)
- Carmickle v. Commissioner of Social Security Administration, 533 F.3d 1155, 1165 (9th Cir. 2008)
- Taylor v. Commissioner of Social Security Administration, 659 F.3d 1228, 1233 (9th Cir. 2011)
- Brewes v. Commissioner of Social Security Administration, 682 F.3d 1157, 1162 (9th Cir. 2012)

- Bruton v. Massanari, 268 F.3d 824, 827 (9th Cir. 2001)
- Rounds v. Commissioner of Social Security Administration, 807 F.3d 996, 1006 (9th Cir. 2015)
- Mills v. Commissioner of Social Security, 2014 WL 4195012, at *4 n.8 (E.D. Cal. Aug. 22, 2014)
- Vertigan v. Halter, 260 F.3d 1044, 1049 (9th Cir. 2001)
- Houghton v. Commissioner of Social Security Administration, 493 F. App'x 843, 845-46 (9th Cir. 2012)
- Matthews v. Shalala, 10 F.3d 678, 680 (9th Cir. 1993)
- Russell v. Bowen, 856 F.2d 81, 84 (9th Cir. 1988)
- Dattilo v. Berryhill, 773 F. App'x 878, 881-82 (9th Cir. 2019)
- Stubbs-Danielson v. Astrue, 539 F.3d 1169, 1175-76 (9th Cir. 2008)
- Treichler v. Commissioner, 775 F.3d 1090, 1102 (9th Cir. 2014)
- Smartt v. Kijakazi, 53 F.4th 489, 500 (9th Cir. 2022)
- Garrison v. Colvin, 759 F.3d 995, 1015 (9th Cir. 2014)
- Rollins v. Massanari, 261 F.3d 853, 856-57 (9th Cir. 2001)
- Tonapetyan v. Halter, 242 F.3d 1144, 1148 (9th Cir. 2001)
- Benton ex rel. Benton v. Barnhart, 331 F.3d 1030, 1040 (9th Cir. 2003)
- Baghoomian v. Astrue, 319 F. App'x 563, 565 (9th Cir. 2009)
- Ghanim v. Colvin, 763 F.3d 1154, 1165 (9th Cir. 2014)
- Batson v. Commissioner of Social Security Administration, 359 F.3d 1190, 1197 (9th Cir. 2004)