

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Alicia Madrigal Barraza v. Commissioner of Social Security

Madrigal Barraza · No. 1:21-cv-0790 JLT BAM · Decided June 12, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California adopted the magistrate judge’s findings and recommendations in an action seeking review of the denial of disability insurance benefits and supplemental security income. The court denied Plaintiff Alicia Madrigal Barraza’s motion for summary judgment and granted the Commissioner’s request to affirm, concluding that any step-two error was harmless and that challenges concerning development of the mental-health record were waived or unsupported. The court directed entry of judgment for the Commissioner and closure of the case.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
DECIDED	June 12, 2025
DOCKET	1:21-cv-0790 JLT BAM
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Plaintiff sought judicial review of the Commissioner's final decision denying disability insurance benefits and supplemental security income. After a magistrate judge issued findings and recommendations, plaintiff objected, and the district court conducted de novo review and adopted the findings and recommendations.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The district court conducted de novo review under 28 U.S.C. § 636(b) (1) of the magistrate judge's findings and recommendations. In reviewing the administrative decision, the court considered whether the ALJ committed harmful error, including whether any step-two error was prejudicial and whether the record was inadequate or ambiguous such that the ALJ had a duty to develop it further.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished
PARTIES	Alicia Madrigal Barraza v. Frank Bisignano, Commissioner of Social Security

TOPICS

judicial review of agency action

summary judgment

waiver

administrative law

civil procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

Social Security disability

administrative law

federal civil procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether any error by the ALJ in finding plaintiff's hiatal hernia and bilateral foot impairments non-severe at step two required remand.
2. Whether plaintiff waived her argument that the ALJ was required to obtain a consultative mental examination or otherwise develop the record by failing to raise the issue during the administrative proceedings.
3. Whether the record was inadequate or ambiguous such that the ALJ had a duty to develop it further concerning plaintiff's mental impairments.
4. Whether the magistrate judge's findings and recommendations should be adopted and the administrative decision affirmed.

HOLDINGS

1. A represented claimant must raise issues and evidence during the administrative proceedings to preserve them for judicial review. Because plaintiff did not raise the need for a consultative mental examination before the ALJ, she waived that challenge.
2. Plaintiff failed to establish that the record was inadequate or ambiguous, and therefore failed to show that the ALJ had a duty to develop the record further or obtain a consultative mental examination.
3. Any assumed error in finding plaintiff's hiatal hernia and bilateral foot impairments non-severe at step two was harmless and did not warrant remand because the ALJ considered those impairments and their resulting limitations at later stages of the sequential evaluation, including in determining residual functional capacity.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“when claimants are represented by counsel, they must raise all issues and evidence at their administrative hearings in order to preserve them on appeal.” (opinion at 3)

“The inquiry at step two is a de minimus screening “to dispose of groundless claims.”” (opinion at 4)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Alicia Madrigal Barraza applied for disability insurance benefits and supplemental security income under Titles II and XVI of the Social Security Act. She alleged that the ALJ erred by treating her hiatal hernia and bilateral foot pain as non-severe impairments and by failing to develop the record concerning her depression. The ALJ considered medical opinions, treatment records, and plaintiff's testimony concerning pain and mental impairments, including an opinion from her treating physician and treatment notes addressing depression.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Plaintiff challenged the administrative denial of her Social Security disability applications, arguing that the ALJ improperly found her hiatal hernia and bilateral foot pain non-severe at step two and failed to develop the record concerning depression. The magistrate judge recommended denying plaintiff's motion for summary judgment and affirming the administrative decision. The district court overruled plaintiff's objections, adopted the findings and recommendations, denied plaintiff's motion, granted the Commissioner's request to affirm, and directed entry of judgment for the defendant.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Kessler v. O'Malley, 2024 WL 1908078, at *5 (E.D. Cal. May 1, 2024)
- Teague v. Astrue, 2010 WL 5094252, at *5 (C.D. Cal. Dec. 7, 2010)
- Meanel v. Apfel, 172 F.3d 1111, 1115 (9th Cir. 1999)
- Shaibi v. Berryhill, 883 F.3d 1102, 1109 (9th Cir. 2018)
- King v. Commissioner of Social Security, 2024 WL 1257331, at *7 (E.D. Cal. Mar. 25, 2024)
- Brandon G.M. v. Kijakazi, 2022 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 95848, at *10 (C.D. Cal. May 26, 2022)
- Hahn v. Berryhill, 2017 WL 2927151, at *4 (D. Or. June 30, 2017)
- Gonzalez v. Kijakazi, No. 1:21-CV-01676-SKO, 2023 WL 6164086, at *6 (E.D. Cal. Sept. 21, 2023)
- Smolen v. Chater, 80 F.3d 1273, 1290 (9th Cir. 1996)
- Burch v. Barnhart, 400 F.3d 676, 682 (9th Cir. 2005)
- Buck v. Berryhill, 869 F.3d 1040, 1049 (9th Cir. 2017)

OPINION

(SS) Madrigal Barraza v. Commissioner of Social Security
PER CURIAM.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

9 EASTERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

10 11 ALICIA MADRIGAL BARRAZA, Case No. 1:21-cv-0790 JLT BAM 12 Plaintiff, ORDER
ADOPTING THE FINDINGS AND

RECOMMENDATIONS; DENYING

13 PLAINTIFF’S MOTION FOR SUMMARY

v. JUDGMENT; GRANTING DEFENDANT’S

14 REQUEST TO AFFIRM; AND DIRECTING

FRANK BISIGNANO, ENTRY OF JUDGMENT IN FAVOR OF

15 Commissioner of Social Security,1 DEFENDANT FRANK BIGSIGNANO,

COMMISSIONER OF SOCIAL SECURITY,
16 Defendant. AND AGAINST PLAINTIFF ALICIA
MADRIGAL BARRAZA

17 (Docs. 20, 24, 26) 18 Alicia Madrigal Barraza initiated this action seeking judicial review of a
final decision 19 denying her applications for disability insurance benefits and supplemental
security income under 20 Titles II and XVI of the Social Security Act. (See Docs. 1, 20.) Plaintiff
contends that the ALJ 21 erred by: (1) finding at step two that her hiatal hernia and bilateral foot
pain were not severe 22 impairments and (2) not developing the record related to her depression.
(Doc. 20 at 9-14.) 23 The assigned magistrate judge found that “any purported error in failing to
include 24 Plaintiff’s hernia or bilateral foot pain as severe impairments at step two is harmless
because the 25 ALJ considered those impairments and any resulting limitations at subsequent steps
of the 26 sequential evaluation.” (Doc. 26 at 5-6.) The magistrate judge determined that because
the ALJ 27 1 Frank Bisginano became the Commissioner of Social Security on May 7, 2025.
Pursuant to Rule 25(d) of the 28 Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, the Court substitutes Frank
Bisignano as the defendant in this action. 1 considered the identified impairments— “and any
impact those impairments would have when 2 determining an appropriate RFC”— Plaintiff did not
identify any error warranting remand. (Id., 3 citing *Kessler v. O’Malley*, 2024 WL 1908078, at *5
(E.D. Cal. May 1, 2024); *Teague v. Astrue*, 4 2010 WL 5094252, at *5 (C.D. Cal. Dec. 7, 2010).)
Next, the magistrate judge found that to the 5 extent Plaintiff challenges the record as incomplete,
the “issue is not properly preserved for 6 appeal” because at the hearing, Plaintiff was represented
by counsel, who indicated the record 7 was complete. (Id. at 8.) The magistrate judge determined
that even if Plaintiff did not waive the 8 issue, there was “no indication that the record was
ambiguous or inadequate to allow for proper 9 evaluation” of Plaintiff’s mental impairments, as
required to trigger the duty to develop the 10 record. (Id. at 10.) The magistrate judge observed the
record included, and the ALJ considered, 11 an opinion from Plaintiff’s treating physician
concerning Plaintiff’s mental impairments and 12 treatment notes that “addressed ... Plaintiff’s
complaints of depression.” (Id.) Thus, the 13 magistrate judge recommended the Court deny
Plaintiff’s motion for summary judgment, affirm 14 the administrative decision, and enter
judgment in favor of the Commissioner. (Id. at 11.) 15 Plaintiff filed objections to the Findings and
Recommendations, asserting the Court 16 should reject the findings of the magistrate judge. (Doc.
27.) Plaintiff contends the magistrate 17 judge “did not provide[] any rationale to support the
conclusion that the medical evidence does 18 not ‘clearly establish’ Plaintiff’s bilateral plantar
fasciitis and heel spurs to be non-severe.” (Id. at 19 2.) Plaintiff acknowledges the ALJ cited
evidence concerning her plantar fasciitis and heel spurs, 20 but maintains the ALJ did not address
limitations caused by her combined impairments. (Id. at 3; 21 see also id. at 3-6.) Plaintiff also
argues that “whether the issue was ‘complete’ is not the issue,” 22 and instead the issue is that the
record was “inadequate to allow for proper evaluation of the 23 evidence.” (Id. at 6.) Plaintiff
contends that counsel “affirming that all existing medical evidence 24 has been submitted, does

not mean that the record is ‘adequate to allow for proper evaluation of 25 the evidence.’” (Id.) According to Plaintiff, “she presented evidence of disabling [mental] 26 impairment” and the ALJ had “the duty to develop the record to assure that there is sufficient 27 evidence to evaluate the impairments.” (Id. at 7.) Plaintiff maintains there is a gap in the record 28 concerning her mental impairments, similar to a gap “contemplated by the same case cited by the 1 Magistrate.” (Id. at 8, citing *Gonzalez v. Kijakazi*, No. 1:21-CV-01676-SKO, 2023 WL 6164086, 2 at *6 (E.D. Cal. Sept. 21, 2023).) Plaintiff contends that because there was not a consultative 3 examination concerning her mental impairments, remand is warranted for such to be obtained. 4 (Id. at 8-9.) The Commissioner filed a response to the objections, asserting the Court should 5 adopt the recommendations. (Doc. 28.) 6 As an initial matter, as the magistrate judge observed, the Ninth Circuit determined that 7 “when claimants are represented by counsel, they must raise all issues and evidence at their 8 administrative hearings in order to preserve them on appeal.” *Meanel v. Apfel*, 172 F.3d 1111, 9 1115 (9th Cir. 1999). Toward this end, because it is undisputed that Plaintiff did not raise the 10 need of a consultative mental examination, such an argument was waived. See, e.g., *Shaibi v. 11 Berryhill*, 883 F.3d 1102, 1109 (9th Cir. 2018) (finding failure by counsel to raise an issue in the 12 administrative proceedings results in “the claimant forfeit[ing] such a challenge on appeal”); *King 13 v. Comm’r of Soc. Sec.*, 2024 WL 1257331, at *7 (E.D. Cal. Mar. 25, 2024) (finding a plaintiff 14 waived the argument that a consultative examination was required where counsel “fail[ed] to raise 15 the issue before the ALJ or the Appeals Council”); *Brandon G.M. v. Kijakazi*, 2022 U.S. Dist. 16 LEXIS 95848, at *10 (C.D. Cal. May 26, 2022) (holding a claimant waived an argument that the 17 ALJ was required to order a consultative examination “by failing to request a consultative 18 examination during the administrative proceedings”); *Hahn v. Berryhill*, 2017 WL 2927151, at *4 19 (D. Or. June 30, 2017) (“Plaintiff, by not raising the issue before the ALJ, waived any challenge 20 to the ALJ’s failure to develop the record further by ordering a comprehensive physical 21 examination.”) Consequently, Plaintiff is now unable to claim the ALJ had a duty to develop the 22 record or obtain a consultative examination concerning her mental impairments. 23 Moreover, even in *Gonzalez*, which Plaintiff suggests in her objections “contemplated” a 24 similar gap in the record, this Court found that Plaintiff failed to show the ALJ had a duty to 25 develop the record. See *Gonzalez*, 2023 WL 6164086, at *6. The Court explained that “[t]he 26 record contained [Gonzalez’s] complete treatment records, as counsel conceded at the hearing [], 27 and no ‘gaps’ or inconsistencies were noted.” Id. (citation omitted). The magistrate judge found 28 *Gonzalez* did not show the ALJ had a duty to develop the record. Id. Similarly, here, Plaintiff 1 does not show that she raised the issue of needing a mental consultative examination before the 2 ALJ, and Plaintiff fails to show the record was inadequate or ambiguous. 3 Plaintiff also fails to show the ALJ committed harmful error at step two. The inquiry at 4 step two is a de minimus screening “to dispose of groundless claims.” *Smolen v. Chater*, 80 F.3d 5 1273, 1290 (9th Cir. 1996). However, any error from finding specific impairments are not severe 6 may be harmless when step two is resolved in the claimant’s favor.

Burch v. Barnhart, 400 F.3d 7 676, 682 (9th Cir. 2005). Although Plaintiff contends the magistrate judge erred by not 8 addressing the lack of evidence to support the determination that Plaintiff's hiatal hernia and 9 bilateral foot impairments were not severe, the magistrate judge determined that even assuming 10 the ALJ erred at step two with this finding, such error was harmless. (See Doc. 26 at 5-7.) As the 11 magistrate judge found, because the ALJ considered evidence concerning these impairments and 12 their resulting limitations to determine the residual functional capacity—including medical 13 opinions, treatment records, and Plaintiff's own testimony concerning her pain— Plaintiff fails to 14 show prejudice and any such error was harmless. See Burch, 400 F.3d at 682; Buck v. Berryhill, 15 869 F.3d 1040, 1049 (9th Cir. 2017) (finding where the ALJ resolved step two in the claimant's 16 favor and constituted with the sequential analysis, the claimant "could not possibly have been 17 prejudiced" and "[a]ny alleged error is therefore harmless and cannot be the basis for a remand"); 18 see also Kessler v. O'Malley, 2024 WL 1908078, at *4-5 (E.D. Cal. May 1, 2024) (finding any 19 error by the ALJ at step two was harmless because the ALJ considered the claimant's testimony 20 and medical records related to his identified impairment). 21 According to 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1), this Court conducted a de novo review of the case. 22 Having carefully reviewed the entire matter— including Plaintiff's objections and the 23 Commissioner's response thereto—the Court concludes the Findings and Recommendations are 24 supported by the record and proper analysis. Thus, the Court ORDERS: 25 1. The Findings and Recommendations (Doc. 26) are ADOPTED. 26 2. Plaintiff's motion for summary judgment (Doc. 20) is DENIED. 27 3. Defendant's request to affirm the administrative decision (Doc. 24) is GRANTED. 28 4. The Clerk of Court is directed to enter judgment in favor of Defendant Frank 1 Bisginano, Commissioner of Social Security, and against Plaintiff Alicia Madrigal 2 Barraza, and to close this case. 3 4 IT IS SO ORDERED. 5 Dated: _ June 12, 2025 Cerin | Tower

TED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE

6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28