

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF
WASHINGTON

Nicolas M. v. Commissioner of Social Security

Nicolas M. · No. C25-5275-SKV · Decided December 9, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Western District of Washington affirmed the Commissioner of Social Security’s denial of Nicolas M.’s applications for Supplemental Security Income and Disability Insurance Benefits. The court held that the ALJ reasonably evaluated the medical opinion evidence and that the decision was supported by substantial evidence.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Western District of Washington
WRITING FOR THE COURT	S. Kate Vaughan
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Western District of Washington
DECIDED	December 9, 2025
DOCKET	C25-5275-SKV
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Plaintiff sought judicial review under 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) of the Commissioner's denial of Supplemental Security Income and Disability Insurance Benefits.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court may set aside the Commissioner's decision only if the ALJ committed harmful legal error or the findings are unsupported by substantial evidence in the record as a whole. The court may not reweigh the evidence or substitute its judgment for the Commissioner's, and must uphold the Commissioner's conclusion when the evidence is susceptible to more than one rational interpretation.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unknown; district court opinion with no reporter citation and no stated precedential designation.
PARTIES	Nicolas M. v. Commissioner of Social Security

TOPICS

judicial review of agency action

administrative law

agency adjudication

PRACTICE AREAS

Social Security disability

administrative law

judicial review of agency action

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the ALJ erred in evaluating and discounting the medical opinion of Alysa A. Ruddell, Ph.D.
2. Whether the ALJ's decision was supported by substantial evidence and free of harmful legal error.

HOLDINGS

1. The ALJ did not err in discounting Dr. Ruddell's opinion that Plaintiff had marked to severe mental-health impairments because the opinion was contradicted by objective medical evidence, including largely normal mental-status examinations and improvement with treatment.
2. The Commissioner's final decision was supported by substantial evidence and was not the product of harmful legal error; the decision was affirmed.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Under 42 U.S.C. § 405(g), this Court may set aside the Commissioner’s denial of social security benefits when the ALJ’s findings are based on harmful legal error or not supported by substantial evidence in the record as a whole.” (at 1)

“Substantial evidence is “more than a mere scintilla. It means - and means only - such relevant evidence as a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support a conclusion.”” (at 1)

“The Commissioner’s final decision is AFFIRMED and this case is DISMISSED with prejudice.” (at 3)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Nicolas M. was born in 1992, completed high school, and previously worked as a flagger, last working gainfully in June 2020. He applied for SSI and DIB in November 2021, alleging disability based primarily on mental impairments. The ALJ found severe depressive, anxiety, personality, substance-use, and bipolar disorders, but determined that Plaintiff retained the capacity for simple, routine work with specified social and workplace limitations. In reviewing the medical opinion evidence, the court relied on treatment-related symptom improvement, inconsistent medication compliance, and largely normal mental-status examinations.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Plaintiff applied for SSI and DIB alleging disability beginning June 15, 2020. The applications were denied initially and on reconsideration; after a February 16, 2024 hearing, the ALJ found Plaintiff not disabled. The Appeals Council denied review, and Plaintiff appealed to the district court, where the parties consented to proceed before the magistrate judge.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Bayliss v. Barnhart, 427 F.3d 1211, 1214 (9th Cir. 2005)
- Molina v. Astrue, 674 F.3d 1104, 1115 (9th Cir. 2012)
- Biestek v. Berryhill, 587 U.S. 97, 103 (2019)
- Magallanes v. Bowen, 881 F.2d 747, 750 (9th Cir. 1989)
- Andrews v. Shalala, 53 F.3d 1035, 1039 (9th Cir. 1995)
- Thomas v. Barnhart, 278 F.3d 947, 954 (9th Cir. 2002)
- Rose P. v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec., 414 F. Supp. 3d 1339, 1343 (W.D. Wash. 2019)
- Warre v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec. Admin., 439 F.3d 1001, 1006 (9th Cir. 2006)
- Treichler v. Comm'r of SSA, 775 F.3d 1090, 1099 (9th Cir. 2014)

OPINION

Martin

PER CURIAM.

1 2 3 4 5

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

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WESTERN DISTRICT OF WASHINGTON

AT SEATTLE

7

8 NICOLAS M.,

9 Plaintiff, Case No. C25-5275-SKV

10 v. ORDER AFFIRMING THE

COMMISSIONER'S DECISION

11 COMMISSIONER OF SOCIAL SECURITY,

12 Defendant. 13

14 Plaintiff seeks review of the denial of his applications for Supplemental Security Income 15 (SSI) and Disability Insurance Benefits (DIB). Having considered the ALJ's decision, the 16 administrative record (AR), and all memoranda of record, the Court AFFIRMS the 17 Commissioner's final decision and DISMISSES the case with prejudice.

18 BACKGROUND

19 Plaintiff was born in 1992, has a high school education, and has worked as a flagger. AR 20 29. Plaintiff was last gainfully employed in June 2020. AR 19. 21 On November 10, 2021, Plaintiff applied for benefits, alleging disability as of June 15, 22 2020. AR 17. Plaintiff's applications were denied initially and on reconsideration, and Plaintiff 23 1 requested a hearing. AR 17. After the

ALJ conducted a hearing on February 16, 2024, the ALJ issued a decision finding Plaintiff not disabled. AR 17, 30.

3 THE ALJ'S DECISION

4 Utilizing the five-step disability evaluation process,¹ the ALJ found: 5 Step one: Plaintiff has not engaged in substantial gainful activity since June 2020. 6 Step two: Plaintiff has the following severe impairments: depressive disorder, anxiety disorder, personality disorder, substance addiction - drugs, and bipolar disorder. 7 Step three: These impairments do not meet or equal the requirements of a listed 8 impairment.² 9 Residual Functional Capacity: Plaintiff can perform a full range of work at all exertional levels but with the following non-exertional limitations: he can perform 10 simple, routine tasks, and can tolerate occasional contact with coworkers, supervisors, and the general public. He cannot engage in tasks that require teamwork or close 11 collaboration with coworkers and requires regular work breaks at 2-hour intervals. He can tolerate occasional changes to work routines and processes. 12 Step four: Plaintiff can perform past relevant work. 13 Step five: As there are jobs that exist in significant numbers in the national economy that 14 Plaintiff can perform, Plaintiff is not disabled. 15 AR 19-30. 16 The Appeals Council denied Plaintiff's request for review, making the ALJ's decision the 17 Commissioner's final decision. AR 1. Plaintiff appealed the final decision of the Commissioner 18 to this Court. Dkt. 1. The parties consented to proceed before the undersigned Magistrate Judge.

19 Dkt. 3.

20 LEGAL STANDARDS

21 Under 42 U.S.C. § 405(g), this Court may set aside the Commissioner's denial of social
22 security benefits when the ALJ's findings are based on harmful legal error or not supported by
23 1 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520, 416.920. 2 20 C.F.R. Part 404, Subpart P, App. 1. 1 substantial evidence in the record as a whole. *Bayliss v. Barnhart*, 427 F.3d 1211, 1214 (9th Cir. 2 2005). As a general principle, an ALJ's error may be deemed harmless where it is 3 "inconsequential to the ultimate nondisability determination." *Molina v. Astrue*, 674 F.3d 1104, 4 1115 (9th Cir. 2012) (cited sources omitted). The Court looks to "the record as a whole to 5 determine whether the error alters the outcome of the case." *Id.* 6 Substantial evidence is "more than a mere scintilla. It means - and means only - such 7 relevant evidence as a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support a conclusion." 8 *Biestek v. Berryhill*, 587 U.S. 97, 103 (2019) (cleaned up); *Magallanes v. Bowen*, 881 F.2d 747, 9 750 (9th Cir. 1989). The ALJ is responsible for evaluating symptom testimony, resolving 10 conflicts in medical testimony, and resolving any other ambiguities that might exist. *Andrews v.* 11 *Shalala*, 53 F.3d 1035, 1039 (9th Cir. 1995). While the Court is required to examine the record 12 as a whole, it may neither reweigh the evidence nor substitute its judgment for that of the 13 Commissioner. *Thomas v. Barnhart*, 278 F.3d 947, 954 (9th Cir. 2002). When the evidence is 14 susceptible to more than one rational interpretation, it is the Commissioner's conclusion that 15 must be upheld. *Id.*

16 DISCUSSION

17 Plaintiff argues the ALJ erred by misevaluating the medical opinion evidence. The 18 Commissioner argues the ALJ's decision is free of harmful legal error, supported by substantial 19 evidence, and should be affirmed. 20 A. The ALJ Did Not Err in Evaluating the Medical Opinion Evidence 21 Plaintiff argues the ALJ erred in evaluating the opinion of Alysa A. Ruddell, Ph.D. Dkt. 22 13 at 2-4. The ALJ considered Dr. Ruddell's opinion and discounted it as contradicted by the 23 1 objective medical evidence which showed largely normal mental status exams and improvement 2 with treatment. AR 27. 3 Dr. Ruddell examined Plaintiff in October 2021. AR 302. At the time of the exam, 4 Plaintiff reported he was not taking any medications for his mental health. AR 302. However, 5 as summarized by the ALJ, Plaintiff's treatment history demonstrated symptom improvement 6 and control with medication through 2023, symptom regression with inconsistent medication 7 compliance, and normal mental status exams even when not using medication. AR 23-26. This 8 contradicted Dr. Ruddell's opinion of marked to severe mental health impairments, and the ALJ 9 reasonably discounted her opinion. "Impairments that can be 'controlled effectively' by 10 medication or treatment are not considered disabling[.]" *Rose P. v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec.*, 414 F.

11 Supp. 3d 1339, 1343 (W.D. Wash. 2019) (quoting *Warre v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec. Admin.*, 439 12 F.3d 1001, 1006 (9th Cir. 2006)). While the ALJ could have explained his decision with more 13 clarity, his path can be reasonably discerned. See *Treichler v. Comm'r of SSA*, 775 F.3d 1090, 14 1099 (9th Cir. 2014). The Court therefore finds no error.

15 CONCLUSION

16 For the reasons set forth above, the Commissioner's final decision is AFFIRMED and 17 this case is DISMISSED with prejudice. 18 Dated this 9th day of December, 2025. 19 20 A

21 S. KATE VAUGHAN

United States Magistrate Judge 22 23