

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Villalobos v. Commissioner of Social Security

Villalobos v. Commissioner of Social Security · No. 2:23-cv-1891-SCR · Decided March 31, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California reviewed the Commissioner of Social Security’s denial of Israel Villalobos’s application for Supplemental Security Income. The court held that the administrative law judge’s assessment of the medical opinions, daily activities, and reported symptoms was supported by substantial evidence and applied the correct legal standards. Plaintiff’s motion for summary judgment was denied, and the Commissioner’s cross-motion for summary judgment was granted.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Sean C. Riordan
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
DECIDED	March 31, 2025
DOCKET	2:23-cv-1891-SCR
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Plaintiff sought judicial review under 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) of the Commissioner's final decision denying his application for Supplemental Security Income. The parties filed cross-motions for summary judgment.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The Commissioner's decision must be upheld if supported by substantial evidence and based on the correct legal standards. Substantial evidence is more than a mere scintilla but may be less than a preponderance and is evidence that a reasonable mind might accept as adequate. The court reviews the record as a whole, considers evidence supporting and detracting from the decision, may not substitute its judgment for the Commissioner's, and may affirm only on grounds relied upon by the ALJ. Harmless error does not require reversal when the error is inconsequential to the ultimate nondisability determination.

PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unpublished district-court order; precedential status not identified in the source.
PARTIES	Israel Villalobos v. Commissioner of Social Security

TOPICS

judicial review of agency action administrative law agency adjudication

PRACTICE AREAS

Social Security law administrative law disability benefits judicial review of agency action

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the ALJ improperly discounted the opinions of psychological examiners Dr. James Wakefield and Dr. W. Fahnbulleh when assessing Plaintiff's residual functional capacity.
2. Whether the ALJ improperly relied on Plaintiff's daily activities and self-reported symptoms in evaluating the persuasiveness of Dr. Fahnbulleh's opinion.
3. Whether the Commissioner's finding that Plaintiff was not disabled was supported by substantial evidence and applied the correct legal standards.

HOLDINGS

1. The ALJ did not err in finding portions of Dr. Wakefield's and Dr. Fahnbulleh's opinions unpersuasive because the ALJ provided reasonable, record-supported reasons grounded in the opinions' consistency with other evidence, the examiners' own findings, prior administrative psychological findings, and Plaintiff's activities.
2. The ALJ properly considered Plaintiff's activities as evidence that was specifically inconsistent with the degree of moderate limitations proposed by Dr. Fahnbulleh; the ALJ did not require Plaintiff to be completely bedridden or helpless to establish disability.
3. The ALJ did not commit reversible error by considering the disconnect between Dr. Fahnbulleh's clinical observations and the extensive work-related limitations based substantially on Plaintiff's reported symptoms.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“The Commissioner’s decision that a claimant is not disabled will be upheld “if it is supported by substantial evidence and if the Commissioner applied the correct legal standards.”” (Legal standards)

“Plaintiff has failed to demonstrate that ALJ Surh erred in finding Dr. Fahnbulleh’s opinion on Plaintiffs work-related limitations unpersuasive. No error in the administrative decision merits reversal.” (Conclusion)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Plaintiff, born in 1995, previously received disability benefits as a child but was found no longer disabled after turning eighteen. He applied for SSI in 2021, alleging disability based on heart problems, asthma, paralyzed vocal cords, high blood pressure, and anxiety. The ALJ found severe asthma, ventricular tachycardia, borderline intellectual functioning, and generalized anxiety disorder, but determined that Plaintiff retained the residual functional capacity for medium work with restrictions to simple, routine, repetitive tasks, occasional public contact, and no concentrated exposure to pulmonary irritants. In reviewing the ALJ's treatment of psychological opinions, the district court relied on the consultative examinations, prior administrative findings, and Plaintiff's reported daily activities.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Plaintiff applied for SSI on March 26, 2021. After the application was denied initially and on reconsideration, an administrative law judge held a telephonic hearing and found Plaintiff not disabled. The Appeals Council denied review, making the ALJ's decision the Commissioner's final decision. Plaintiff filed this action, and the district court denied his motion for summary judgment, granted the Commissioner's cross-motion, affirmed the final decision, and ordered judgment for Defendant.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Washington State Dept. of Social and Health Services v. Guardianship Estate of Keffeler, 537 U.S. 371, 375 (2003)
- Howard ex rel. Wolff v. Barnhart, 341 F.3d 1006, 1011 (9th Cir. 2003)
- Andrews v. Shalala, 53 F.3d 1035, 1039 (9th Cir. 1995)
- Molina v. Astrue, 674 F.3d 1104, 1110-11 (9th Cir. 2012)
- Richardson v. Perales, 402 U.S. 389, 401 (1971)
- Widmark v. Barnhart, 454 F.3d 1063, 1066 (9th Cir. 2006)
- Desrosiers v. Secretary of HHS, 846 F.2d 573, 576 (9th Cir. 1988)
- Jones v. Heckler, 760 F.2d 993, 995 (9th Cir. 1985)
- Edlund v. Massanari, 253 F.3d 1152, 1156 (9th Cir. 2001)
- Thomas v. Barnhart, 278 F.3d 947, 954 (9th Cir. 2002)
- Orn v. Astrue, 495 F.3d 625, 630 (9th Cir. 2007)
- Connett v. Barnhart, 340 F.3d 871, 874 (9th Cir. 2003)
- Robbins v. Social Security Administration, 466 F.3d 880, 885 (9th Cir. 2006)
- Stout v. Commissioner, 454 F.3d 1050, 1055 (9th Cir. 2006)
- Burch v. Barnhart, 400 F.3d 676, 679 (9th Cir. 2005)
- Bowen v. Yuckert, 482 U.S. 137, 140 (1987)
- Barnhart v. Thomas, 540 U.S. 20, 24-25 (2003)

- Hill v. Astrue, 698 F.3d 1153, 1161 (9th Cir. 2012)
- Champagne v. Colvin, 582 F. App'x 696, 697 (9th Cir. 2014)
- Carmickle v. Commissioner, 533 F.3d 1155, 1161 n.2 (9th Cir. 2008)
- Woods v. Kijakazi, 32 F.4th 785, 788 (9th Cir. 2022)
- Thomas v. Sullivan, 876 F.2d 666, 669 (8th Cir. 1989)
- Forehand v. Barnhart, 364 F.3d 984, 988 (8th Cir. 2004)
- Kimball v. Commissioner of Social Security, 2022 WL 17343820, at *4 (E.D. Cal. Nov. 30, 2022)
- Smartt v. Kijakazi, 53 F.4th 489, 499-500 (9th Cir. 2022)
- Blankenship v. Bowen, 874 F.2d 1116, 1121 (6th Cir. 1989)
- Poulin v. Bowen, 817 F.2d 865, 873-74 (D.C. Cir. 1987)
- Buck v. Berryhill, 869 F.3d 1040, 1049 (9th Cir. 2017)
- Garrison v. Colvin, 759 F.3d 995, 1014, 1017 (9th Cir. 2014)
- Lingenfelter v. Astrue, 504 F.3d 1028, 1035-36 (9th Cir. 2007)
- Bunnell v. Sullivan, 947 F.2d 341, 344 (9th Cir. 1991)
- Ukolov v. Barnhart, 420 F.3d 1002, 1005-06 (9th Cir. 2005)