

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Kelley C. v. SSA Commissioner

No. 24-cv-08055-TSH (N.D. Cal. Oct. 14, 2025) · No. 24-cv-08055-TSH · Decided October 14, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Northern District of California resolves cross-motions for summary judgment in a Social Security disability benefits appeal. The court holds that the Administrative Law Judge provided clear and convincing reasons for discounting the plaintiff’s subjective symptom testimony and did not fail to fully and fairly develop the record. Plaintiff’s motion is denied, and the Commissioner’s cross-motion is granted.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Northern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Thomas S. Hixson
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Northern District of California
DECIDED	October 14, 2025
DOCKET	24-cv-08055-TSH
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Plaintiff sought judicial review under 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) of the Commissioner’s denial of Social Security disability insurance benefits. The parties filed cross-motions for summary judgment.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court reviews the Commissioner’s decision under 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) and may disturb it only if it is unsupported by substantial evidence or based on improper legal standards. The court must consider the entire administrative record, defer to the ALJ’s reasonable resolution of evidentiary conflicts and ambiguities, and may not substitute its judgment for the ALJ’s. A legal error may be harmless when the agency’s path can reasonably be discerned and the error does not affect the outcome.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unpublished district court order; persuasive rather than precedential value
PARTIES	Kelley C. v. SSA Commissioner

TOPICS

judicial review of agency action

administrative law

disability definition

PRACTICE AREAS

social security

administrative law

disability benefits

judicial review

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the ALJ gave legally sufficient reasons supported by substantial evidence for discounting Plaintiff's subjective symptom testimony.
2. Whether the ALJ failed to fully and fairly develop the administrative record.
3. Whether the ALJ improperly evaluated Plaintiff's husband's lay-witness testimony.
4. Whether the ALJ improperly evaluated the state-agency medical consultants' prior administrative medical findings.
5. Whether the vocational-expert testimony lacked evidentiary value because the hypothetical allegedly omitted limitations related to Plaintiff's spinal impairments.

HOLDINGS

1. The ALJ provided clear and convincing reasons supported by substantial evidence for discounting Plaintiff's testimony concerning the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of her symptoms.
2. The ALJ did not violate the duty to fully and fairly develop the record.
3. The ALJ did not commit harmful error by describing but not articulating reasons for evaluating Plaintiff's husband's testimony.
4. The ALJ properly evaluated the state-agency medical consultants' findings and reasonably found Dr. DeSouza's more restrictive assessment more persuasive than Dr. Trias's assessment.
5. The ALJ properly relied on the vocational expert's testimony because the hypotheticals included the limitations the ALJ found supported by substantial evidence.

KEY QUOTATIONS

"The Commissioner's decision will be disturbed only if it is not supported by substantial evidence or if it is based on the application of improper legal standards." (at 2)

"In sum, the record demonstrates the ALJ provided Plaintiff with a full and fair hearing and that there was sufficient and adequate evidence in the overall record for the ALJ to rely on in adjudicating Plaintiff's disability claim." (at 15)

"Even if the ALJ were required to articulate germane reasons, the Court finds any failure to do so is harmless." (at 18)

"Here, the ALJ's hypothetical questions contained limitations she found were supported by substantial evidence." (at 23)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Plaintiff alleged disability from severe lumbar-spine impairments, including degenerative disc disease with radiculopathy, following three spinal surgeries in 2011, 2017, and February 2021. She reported persistent pain, numbness, difficulty sitting and standing, and a need to spend substantial time lying down. The record also showed periods of improvement with conservative treatment, physical therapy, medication, exercise, and other activities, including caring for her child, driving, shopping, household chores, and assisting her mother. The ALJ found Plaintiff capable of a restricted range of light work and able to perform certain past relevant work.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Plaintiff applied for disability insurance benefits, alleging an onset date of February 19, 2021. Her claim was denied initially and on reconsideration; an ALJ held a hearing and issued an unfavorable decision on March 5, 2024. The Appeals Council denied review on October 9, 2024, after which Plaintiff filed this action. The district court denied Plaintiff's motion for summary judgment and granted the Commissioner's cross-motion.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- Brown-Hunter v. Colvin, 806 F.3d 487, 492 (9th Cir. 2015)
- Biestek v. Berryhill, 587 U.S. 97, 102-03 (2019)
- Garrison v. Colvin, 759 F.3d 995, 1009-10 (9th Cir. 2014)
- Hill v. Astrue, 698 F.3d 1153, 1159 (9th Cir. 2012)
- Ford v. Saul, 950 F.3d 1141, 1148-49, 1159 (9th Cir. 2020)
- Sullivan v. Zebley, 493 U.S. 521, 530 (1990)
- Thomas v. Barnhart, 278 F.3d 947, 955, 959 (9th Cir. 2002)
- Trevizo v. Berryhill, 871 F.3d 664, 678 (9th Cir. 2017)
- Molina v. Astrue, 674 F.3d 1104, 1112-13 (9th Cir. 2012)
- Smartt v. Kijakazi, 53 F.4th 489, 499 (9th Cir. 2022)
- Rollins v. Massanari, 261 F.3d 853, 857 (9th Cir. 2001)
- Reyes v. Berryhill, 716 Fed. App'x 714, 714 (9th Cir. 2018)
- Wellington v. Berryhill, 878 F.3d 867, 876 (9th Cir. 2017)
- Fennell v. Berryhill, 721 Fed. App'x 652, 655 (9th Cir. 2018)
- Back v. Colvin, 653 Fed. App'x 550, 552 (9th Cir. 2016)
- Andrews v. Shalala, 53 F.3d 1035, 1039 (9th Cir. 1995)
- Guillen v. Commissioner of Social Security, 232 F. App'x 699, 701-02 (9th Cir. 2007)
- Mayes v. Massanari, 276 F.3d 453, 459-60 (9th Cir. 2001)
- Garcia v. Commissioner of Social Security, 768 F.3d 925, 930 (9th Cir. 2014)

- Abrew v. Astrue, 303 Fed. App'x 567, 569 (9th Cir. 2008)
- Lewis v. Apfel, 236 F.3d 503, 514 (9th Cir. 2001)
- Treichler v. Commissioner of Social Security, 775 F.3d 1090, 1098 (9th Cir. 2014)
- Batson v. Commissioner of Social Security Administration, 359 F.3d 1190, 1193, 1195 (9th Cir. 2004)
- Crummett v. King, 2025 WL 470890, at *2 (9th Cir. Feb. 12, 2025)
- Fryer v. Kijakazi, 2022 WL 17958630, at *3 n.1 (9th Cir. Dec. 27, 2022)
- Stephens v. Kijakazi, 2023 WL 6937296, at *2 (9th Cir. Oct. 20, 2023)
- Trogdon v. O'Malley, 2024 WL 3949081, at *1 (9th Cir. Aug. 27, 2024)
- Valentine v. Commissioner of Social Security Administration, 574 F.3d 685, 694 (9th Cir. 2009)
- De Mello v. Kijakazi, 2022 WL 17583054, at *1 (9th Cir. Dec. 12, 2022)
- Jacob v. Berryhill, 756 F. App'x 709, 711-12 (9th Cir. 2018)
- Woods v. Kijakazi, 32 F.4th 785, 787, 791-93 (9th Cir. 2022)
- Wischmann v. Kijakazi, 68 F.4th 498, 502 (9th Cir. 2023)
- Pamela M. v. Kijakazi, 2021 WL 4461546, at *13 (N.D. Cal. Sept. 29, 2021)
- Stubbs-Danielson v. Astrue, 539 F.3d 1169, 1175-76 (9th Cir. 2008)
- Rimando v. Commissioner of Social Security Administration, 2022 WL 4113592, at *19 (D. Ariz. July 15, 2022), report and recommendation adopted, 2022 WL 3443679 (D. Ariz. Aug. 17, 2022)
- Smith v. Berryhill, 752 Fed. App'x 473, 475-76 (9th Cir. 2019)