

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE DISTRICT OF MAINE

Christina S. v. Frank Bisignano, Commissioner of Social Security

Christina S. · No. 2:25-cv-00231-KFW · Decided May 15, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the District of Maine affirmed the Commissioner of Social Security’s denial of disability benefits. The court held that the Administrative Law Judge’s evaluation of the medical opinions was supported by substantial evidence, and that any errors were harmless or waived.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the District of Maine
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Karen Frink Wolf
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the District of Maine
DECIDED	May 15, 2026
DOCKET	2:25-cv-00231-KFW
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Appeal from the Commissioner's final decision denying Social Security disability benefits after the Appeals Council denied review.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court reviewed whether the Commissioner's decision was based on the correct legal standards and supported by substantial evidence under 42 U.S.C. § 405(g). Findings supported by substantial evidence are conclusive even if the record could support a different result; findings are not conclusive when derived by ignoring evidence, misapplying the law, or judging matters entrusted to experts.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unknown
PARTIES	Christina S. v. Frank Bisignano, 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 committed harmful error by discounting medical opinions, including Dr. Jokonya's opinion, based in part on mistaken assumptions about who completed portions of the opinion form.
2. Whether the claimant could obtain remand based on an argument first raised at oral argument concerning Dr. Jokonya's treating relationship and the ALJ's reliance on the form's indication that Dr. Jokonya had seen the claimant only once.

HOLDINGS

1. The error was harmless and did not require remand because the ALJ gave several other supported reasons for discounting Dr. Jokonya's opinion, including its inconsistency with and lack of support from other record evidence.
2. The claimant waived the argument that Dr. Jokonya had a substantial ongoing treating relationship with her by raising it for the first time at oral argument.
3. The Commissioner's decision was supported by substantial evidence and based on the correct legal standards.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“If an ALJ’s findings are supported by substantial evidence, they are conclusive even if the record could arguably support a different result.”

“But an ALJ’s findings “are not conclusive when derived by ignoring evidence, misapplying the law, or judging matters entrusted to experts.””

“As this Court has stated over and over again, the mere fact that a claimant can point to evidence of record supporting a different conclusion does not, in itself, warrant remand.”

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

The claimant alleged disability and challenged the ALJ's treatment of several medical opinions, particularly the opinion of primary care physician Chiedza G. Jokonya, M.D. The ALJ discounted Dr. Jokonya's opinion based partly on an erroneous belief that the claimant had completed portions of the form, although the record showed that physical therapist Kate Lyn Chamberlin had done so. The court concluded that the error was harmless because the ALJ gave several other supported reasons for discounting the opinion, including inconsistency with and lack of support from other record evidence.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Christina S. applied for benefits in November 2021. After denial at the initial and reconsideration levels, she received an administrative hearing in November 2023. The ALJ found that she had several severe impairments but retained the residual functional capacity for light work with additional limitations and could perform other work existing in substantial numbers in the national economy. The Appeals Council denied review, and the court affirmed the Commissioner's final decision.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Seavey v. Barnhart, 276 F.3d 1, 9 (1st Cir. 2001)
- Biestek v. Berryhill, 587 U.S. 97, 102-03 (2019)
- Irlanda Ortiz v. Secretary of Health & Human Services, 955 F.2d 765, 769 (1st Cir. 1991)
- Nguyen v. Chater, 172 F.3d 31, 35 (1st Cir. 1999)
- Justin P. v. O'Malley, No. 2:23-cv-00053-LEW, 2024 WL 413351, at *2 (D. Me. Feb. 5, 2024) (rec. dec.), aff'd, 2024 WL 1281554 (D. Me. Mar. 26, 2024)
- Rodriguez v. Secretary of Health & Human Services, 647 F.2d 218, 222 (1st Cir. 1981)
- Malaney v. Berryhill, No. 2:16-cv-00404-GZS, 2017 WL 2537226, at *5 (D. Me. June 11, 2017) (rec. dec.), aff'd, 2017 WL 2963371 (D. Me. July 11, 2017), aff'd, No. 17-1889, 2019 WL 2222474 (1st Cir. May 15, 2019)
- Bethany W. v. Kijakazi, No. 2:21-cv-00360-NT, 2022 WL 16919256, at *2 n.2 (D. Me. Nov. 14, 2022) (rec. dec.), aff'd, 2022 WL 17338852 (D. Me. Nov. 30, 2022)
- Katherine L. v. O'Malley, No. 2:23-cv-00354-JAW, 2024 WL 3616679, at *3 (D. Me. July 31, 2024) (rec. dec.), aff'd, 2024 WL 4277813 (D. Me. Sept. 24, 2024)

OPINION

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT DISTRICT OF MAINE CHRISTINA S.,)) Plaintiff)) v.
) No. 2:25-cv-00231-KFW) FRANK BISIGNANO,) Commissioner of) Social Security,))
Defendant) MEMORANDUM DECISION¹ The Plaintiff in this Social Security Disability appeal
contends that the Administrative Law Judge (ALJ) erred in discounting various medical opinions.
See Plaintiff's Brief (ECF No. 11-1).

I discern no harmful error and affirm the Commissioner's decision. I. Background The Plaintiff filed a claim for benefits in November 2021. See Record at 17. After her claim was denied at the initial and reconsideration levels of review, the Plaintiff requested a hearing before an ALJ. See *id.* That hearing took place in November 2023, following which the ALJ issued a written decision finding that, through her date last insured, the Plaintiff had the severe impairments of cardiac arrhythmia, lumbar spine degenerative disc disease status post fusion, hematological ¹ The parties have consented to me presiding over all proceedings in this action including the entry of judgment.

See ECF No. 10. disorder, and neurocognitive disorder. See *id.* at 17, 20. Considering those impairments, the ALJ found that the Plaintiff had the residual functional capacity (RFC) to perform light work as defined in 20 C.F.R. § 404.1567(b) with several additional limitations. See *id.* at 25.

The ALJ found that the Plaintiff could not perform her past relevant work with such an RFC, but that she could perform other work existing in substantial numbers in the national economy and was therefore not disabled. See *id.* at 32-34.

The Appeals Council denied the Plaintiff's request to review the ALJ's decision, see *id.* at 1-3, making that decision the final determination of the Commissioner, see 20 C.F.R. § 404.981. II. Standard of Review A final decision of the Commissioner is subject to judicial review to determine whether it is based on the correct legal standards and supported by substantial evidence.

See 42 U.S.C. § 405(g); *Seavey v. Barnhart*, 276 F.3d 1, 9 (1st Cir. 2001). Substantial evidence in this context means evidence in the administrative record that a reasonable mind could accept as adequate to support an ALJ's findings. See *Biestek v. Berryhill*, 587 U.S. 97, 102-03 (2019). If an ALJ's findings are supported by substantial evidence, they are conclusive even if the record could arguably support a different result.

See *Irlanda Ortiz v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 955 F.2d 765, 769 (1st Cir. 1991). But an ALJ's findings "are not conclusive when derived by ignoring evidence, misapplying the law, or judging matters entrusted to experts." *Nguyen v. Chater*, 172 F.3d 31, 35 (1st Cir. 1999). III. Discussion The Plaintiff criticizes the ALJ's reliance on certain evidence in discounting more favorable medical opinions and points to record evidence that might have supported giving more weight to those opinions.

See Plaintiff's Brief at 5-6. With the exceptions discussed below, however, the Plaintiff does not identify any clear error in the ALJ's recitation of the evidence, and her disagreement with the ALJ's weighing of the evidence is not cause for remand. See *Justin P. v. O'Malley*, No. 2:23 cv 00053 LEW, 2024 WL 413351, at *2 (D. Me. Feb. 5, 2024) (rec. dec.) ("As this Court has stated over and over again, the mere fact that a claimant can point to evidence of record supporting a different conclusion does not, in itself, warrant remand." (cleaned up)), *aff'd*, 2024 WL 1281554 (D.

Me. Mar. 26, 2024); *Rodriguez v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 647 F.2d 218, 222 (1st Cir. 1981) ("[T]he resolution of conflicts in the evidence and the determination of the ultimate question of disability is for [the Commissioner], not for doctors or for the courts.").

The Plaintiff does highlight, see Plaintiff's Brief at 6, that the ALJ discounted the opinion of her primary care physician, Chiedza G. Jokonya, M.D., in part because the form opinion Dr. Jokonya signed was partially filled out by someone else, which led the ALJ to speculate that it was the Plaintiff herself who filled out the form, see Record at 31, 3634-37.

The Plaintiff correctly points out, see Plaintiff's Brief at 6, that the record reflects it was actually evaluating physical therapist Kate Lyn Chamberlin, MS OTR, who partially filled out the form opinion that Dr. Jokonya eventually signed, see Record at 3620. Nevertheless, I agree with the

Commissioner, see Commissioner's Brief (ECF No. 12) at 6-7, that this error was harmless given that the ALJ supportably discounted Dr. Jokonya's opinion for several other reasons, including that it was inconsistent with and unsupported by other evidence in the record, see *Malaney v. Berryhill*, No. 2:16 cv 00404 GZS, 2017 WL 2537226, at *5 (D.

Me. June 11, 2017) (rec. dec.) (concludi-ng- that a-n ALJ's error in discounting a medical opinion was harmless where the ALJ "gave other well supported reasons for discounting the" opinion), aff'd, 2017 WL 2963371 (D. Me. -July 11, 2017), aff'd, No. 17-1889, 2019 WL 2222474 (1st Cir. May 15, 2019).

For the first time at oral argument, the Plaintiff also pointed out that the ALJ discounted Dr. Jokonya's opinion in part because the form Dr. Jokonya signed indicated that she had seen the Plaintiff only one time. See Record at 31, 3634.

The Plaintiff suggested that Dr. Jokonya actually had a substantial ongoing treating relationship with the Plaintiff and that it was Physical Therapist Chamberlin who had seen the Plaintiff only one time. This argument is waived. See *Bethany W. v. Kijakazi*, No. 2:21-cv-00360-NT, 2022 WL 16919256, at *2 n.2 (D. Me. Nov. 14, 2022) (rec. dec.) (noting, in the context of a Social Security appeal, that a party waives a challenge by raising it "for the first time at oral argument"), aff'd, 2022 WL 17338852 (D.

Me. Nov. 30, 2022). Even if the argument were not waived, the Plaintiff makes no attempt to show that remand on this point would be anything other than an empty exercise given the other supported reasons the ALJ gave for discounting Dr. Jokonya's opinion. See *Katherine L. v. O'Malley*, No. 2:23 cv 00354-JAW, 2024 WL 3616679, at *3 (D. Me. July 31, 2024) (rec. dec.) (noting -tha-t a plaintiff must demonstrate "a reasonable probability that the outcome would be different upon remand" to show that an error was harmful (cleaned up)), aff'd, 2024 WL 4277813 (D.

Me. Sept. 24, 2024). Moreover, the fact that Dr. Jokonya signed a form reflecting another provider's patient contact history tends to, if anything, further undermine her opinion. IV. Conclusion For the foregoing reasons, the Commissioner's decision is AFFIRMED. Dated: May 15, 2026 /s/ Karen Frink Wolf United States Magistrate Judge