

In the United States Court of Federal Claims

OFFICE OF SPECIAL MASTERS

No. 15-427V

Filed: December 11, 2020

* * * * *

ROSE M. PORGES, *

UNPUBLISHED

Petitioner,

v.

Attorneys' Fees and Costs

SECRETARY OF HEALTH
AND HUMAN SERVICES,

Respondent.

* * * * *

Nancy R. Meyers, Turning Point Litigation, Greensboro, NC, for petitioner.

Claudia B. Gangi, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC, for respondent.

DECISION ON ATTORNEYS' FEES AND COSTS¹

Roth, Special Master:

On April 28, 2015, Rose M. Porges ("petitioner") filed a petition pursuant to the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program.² Petitioner alleged that she developed chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy after receiving a tetanus-diphtheria-acellular pertussis vaccination on May 1, 2012. See Petition, ECF No. 1. On August 6, 2020, the parties filed a stipulation, which the undersigned adopted as her decision awarding compensation on the same day. ECF No. 85.

On August 31, 2020, petitioner filed an application for final attorneys' fees and costs. ECF No. 112 ("Fees App."). Petitioner requests total attorneys' fees and costs in the amount

¹ The undersigned intends to post this Decision on the United States Court of Federal Claims' website. **This means the decision will be available to anyone with access to the Internet.** In accordance with Vaccine Rule 18(b), petitioner has 14 days to identify and move to redact medical or other information, the disclosure of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of privacy. If, upon review, the undersigned agrees that the identified material fits within this definition, the undersigned will redact such material from public access. Because this unpublished ruling contains a reasoned explanation for the action in this case, the undersigned is required to post it on the United States Court of Federal Claims' website in accordance with the E-Government Act of 2002. 44 U.S.C. § 3501 note (2012) (Federal Management and Promotion of Electronic Government Services).

² National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act of 1986, Pub L. No. 99-660, 100 Stat. 3755.

of \$52,277.40, representing \$51,152.40 in attorneys' fees and \$1,125.00 in costs. Fees App. at 15-16. Pursuant to General Order No. 9, petitioner states she has not personally incurred any costs associated with the prosecution of her petition. Fees App. Ex. 4. Respondent responded to the motion on September 2, 2020, stating "Respondent is satisfied the statutory requirements for an award of attorneys' fees and costs are met in this case" and requesting that the undersigned "exercise her discretion and determine a reasonable award for attorneys' fees and costs." Response at 2-3, ECF No. 91. Petitioner filed a reply on September 3, 2020, concurring with respondent's recommendation that the undersigned exercise her discretion and determine a reasonable award of attorneys' fees and costs. Reply at 1, ECF No. 92.

This matter is now ripe for consideration.

I. Legal Framework

The Vaccine Act permits an award of "reasonable attorneys' fees" and "other costs." § 15(e)(1). If a petitioner succeeds on the merits of his or her claim, the award of attorneys' fees is automatic. *Id.*; see *Sebelius v. Cloer*, 133 S. Ct. 1886, 1891 (2013). However, a petitioner need not prevail on entitlement to receive a fee award as long as the petition was brought in "good faith" and there was a "reasonable basis" for the claim to proceed. § 15(e)(1). Here, because petitioner was awarded compensation pursuant to a stipulation, she is entitled to a final award of reasonable attorneys' fees and costs.

The Federal Circuit has endorsed the use of the lodestar approach to determine what constitutes "reasonable attorneys' fees" and "other costs" under the Vaccine Act. *Avera v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 515 F.3d 1343, 1349 (Fed. Cir. 2008). Under this approach, "an initial estimate of a reasonable attorneys' fees" is calculated by "multiplying the number of hours reasonably expended on the litigation times a reasonable hourly rate." *Id.* at 1347-48 (quoting *Blum v. Stenson*, 465 U.S. 886, 888 (1984)). That product is then adjusted upward or downward based on other specific findings. *Id.*

Special masters have substantial discretion in awarding fees and may adjust a fee request *sua sponte*, apart from objections raised by respondent and without providing petitioners with notice and opportunity to respond. See *Sabella v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 86 Fed. Cl. 201, 209 (2009). Special masters need not engage in a line-by-line analysis of petitioner's fee application when reducing fees. See *Broekelschen v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 102 Fed. Cl. 719, 729 (2011).

II. Discussion

A. Reasonable Hourly Rate

A "reasonable hourly rate" is defined as the rate "prevailing in the community for similar services by lawyers of reasonably comparable skill, experience and reputation." *Avera*, 515 F.3d at 1348 (quoting *Blum*, 465 U.S. at 896 n.11). In general, this rate is based on "the forum rate for the District of Columbia" rather than "the rate in the geographic area of the practice of petitioner's attorney." *Rodriguez v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 632 F.3d 1381, 1384 (Fed. Cir. 2011)

(citing *Avera*, 515 F. 3d at 1349). There is a “limited exception” that provides for attorney's fees to be awarded at local hourly rates when “the bulk of the attorney's work is done outside the forum jurisdiction” and “there is a very significant difference” between the local hourly rate and forum hourly rate. *Id.* This is known as the *Davis County* exception. See *Hall v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 640 F.3d 1351, 1353 (2011) (citing *Davis Cty. Solid Waste Mgmt. & Energy Recovery Special Serv. Dist. v. U.S. EPA*, 169 F.3d 755, 758 (D.C. Cir. 1999)).

For cases in which forum rates apply, *McCulloch* provides the framework for determining the appropriate hourly rate range for attorneys' fees based upon the attorneys' experience. See *McCulloch v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, No. 09–293V, 2015 WL 5634323 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Sept. 1, 2015). The Office of Special Masters has accepted the decision in *McCulloch* and has issued a Fee Schedule for subsequent years.³

Petitioner requests the following hourly rates for her attorneys: for Ms. Nancy Meyers, \$375.00 per hour for work performed in 2018, \$390.00 per hour for work performed in 2019, and \$400.00 per hour for work performed in 2020; for Ms. Lisa Roquemore, \$409.00 per hour for work performed in 2018, \$421.00 per hour for work performed in 2019 and 2020; and for Ms. Hillary Kies, \$325.00 per hour for work performed in 2020.⁴ The rates requested for Ms. Meyers and Ms. Roquemore are consistent with what they have previously been awarded for their Vaccine Program work and are reasonable for their work in the instant case as well. A reasonable hourly rate for Ms. Kies requires additional discussion.

Ms. Kies has been licensed to practice law since 2013, giving her approximately seven years of experience when she began work on this case in 2020. However, Ms. Kies is not currently admitted to practice law before the Court of Federal Claims, and petitioner has provided no evidence to suggest that Ms. Kies has ever been so licensed.⁵ Accordingly, the undersigned cannot compensate her work at attorney rates. *Underwood v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, No. 00–357V, 2013 WL 3157525, at *4 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. May 31, 2013); see Vaccine Rule 14(a)(1). A reasonable rate for Ms. Kies' 2020 work is therefore \$163.00 per hour, the maximum amount awarded to paralegals and other firm staff not licensed to practice law.⁶ Application of this rate results in a reduction of **\$5,540.40**.⁷

³ The 2015-2020 Fee Schedules can be accessed at <http://www.cofc.uscourts.gov/node/2914>. The hourly rates contained within the schedules are updated from the decision in *McCulloch v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, No. 09-293V, 2015 WL 5634323 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Sept. 1, 2015).

⁴ Although the fees motion references an hourly rate of \$330.00 for Ms. Kies, the billing records indicate that Ms. Kies' time was actually billed at \$325.00 per hour. *Compare* Fees App. at 2 *with* Fees App. Ex. 2 at 3.

⁵ The undersigned checked the website for Turning Point Litigation and notes that Ms. Kies' biography does not indicate that she is admitted to practice law before the Court of Federal Claims. See HILLARY KIES – COMMERCIAL LITIGATION ATTORNEY NC – TURNING POINT LITIGATION, <https://www.turningpointlit.com/team/hillary-m-kies/> (last accessed December 11, 2020). The Clerk's Office of the Court of Federal Claims confirmed that Ms. Kies is not admitted to the Court's Bar.

⁶ The undersigned is not making any determination as to whether \$325.00 per hour would be a reasonable rate for Ms. Kies in 2020 had she been admitted to practice in the Court of Federal Claims.

⁷ (\$325.00 per hour requested - \$163.00 per hour awarded) * 34.2 hours billed = \$5,540.40.

B. Hours Reasonably Expended

Attorneys' fees are awarded for the "number of hours reasonably expended on the litigation." *Avera*, 515 F.3d at 1348. Counsel should not include in their fee requests hours that are "excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary." *Saxton ex rel. Saxton v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 3 F.3d 1517, 1521 (Fed. Cir. 1993) (quoting *Hensley v. Eckerhart*, 461 U.S. 424, 434 (1983)). "Unreasonably duplicative or excessive billing" includes "an attorney billing for a single task on multiple occasions, multiple attorneys billing for a single task, attorneys billing excessively for intra office communications, attorneys billing excessive hours, [and] attorneys entering erroneous billing entries." *Raymo v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 129 Fed. Cl. 691, 703 (2016). While attorneys may be compensated for non-attorney-level work, the rate must be comparable to what would be paid for a paralegal or secretary. See *O'Neill v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, No. 08–243V, 2015 WL 2399211, at *9 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Apr. 28, 2015). Clerical and secretarial tasks should not be billed at all, regardless of who performs them. See, e.g., *McCulloch*, 2015 WL 5634323, at *26. Hours spent traveling are ordinarily compensated at one-half of the normal hourly attorney rate. See *Scott v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, No. 08–756V, 2014 WL 2885684, at *3 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. June 5, 2014) (collecting cases). And "it is inappropriate for counsel to bill time for educating themselves about basic aspects of the Vaccine Program." *Matthews v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, No 14–1111V, 2016 WL 2853910, at *2 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Apr. 18, 2016). Ultimately, it is "well within the Special Master's discretion to reduce the hours to a number that, in [her] experience and judgment, [is] reasonable for the work done." *Saxton*, 3 F.3d at 1522. In exercising that discretion, special masters may reduce the number of hours submitted by a percentage of the amount charged. See *Broekelschen*, 102 Fed. Cl. at 728–29 (affirming the Special Master's reduction of attorney and paralegal hours); *Guy v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 38 Fed. Cl. 403, 406 (1997) (same).

The overall hours spent on this matter appear to be reasonable. The undersigned has reviewed the billing entries and finds that the billing entries adequately describe the work done on the case and the amount of time spent on that work. None of the entries appear objectionable, nor has respondent identified any entries as objectionable. Accordingly, petitioner is entitled to final attorneys' fees of \$45,612.00.

C. Reasonable Costs

Like attorneys' fees, a request for reimbursement of attorneys' costs must be reasonable. *Perreira v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 27 Fed. Cl. 29, 34 (Fed. Cl. 1992). Petitioner requests a total of \$1,125.00 in costs for work performed by her expert, Dr. Lawrence Steinman. The undersigned finds this cost reasonable and supported with adequate documentation. Accordingly, petitioner is entitled to the full amount of costs sought.

III. Conclusion

In accordance with the foregoing, petitioner's motion for attorneys' fees and costs is **GRANTED**. The undersigned hereby awards **a lump sum of \$46,737.00, representing**

reimbursement for petitioner's attorneys' fees and costs, in the form of a check payable jointly to petitioner and Ms. Nancy Meyers.

In the absence of a motion for review filed pursuant to RCFC Appendix B, the clerk of the court shall enter judgment in accordance herewith.⁸

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/Mindy Michaels Roth

Mindy Michaels Roth
Special Master

⁸ Entry of judgment can be expedited by each party's filing of a notice renouncing the right to seek review. Vaccine Rule 11(a).