

In the United States Court of Federal Claims

OFFICE OF SPECIAL MASTERS

No. 16-375V

Filed: January 24, 2018

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DEBRA BAKER,	*	UNPUBLISHED
	*	
Petitioner,	*	
v.	*	Decision on Attorneys' Fees and Costs
	*	
SECRETARY OF HEALTH	*	
AND HUMAN SERVICES,	*	
	*	
Respondent.	*	
* * * * *		

Andrew Krueger, Esq., Krueger & Hernandez S.C., Middleton, WI, for petitioner.
Robert Paul Coleman, III, Esq., U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC, for respondent.

DECISION ON ATTORNEYS' FEES AND COSTS¹

Roth, Special Master:

On March 24, 2016, Debra Baker ("Ms. Baker" or "petitioner") filed a petition for compensation under the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program.² Petitioner alleges that she developed Guillain-Barre Syndrome ("GBS") and Bell's palsy as a result of receiving a tetanus-diphtheria-acellular pertussis ("Tdap") vaccination on July 14, 2015. *See* Petition ("Pet."), ECF No. 1. On January 16, 2018, the undersigned issued a Decision awarding compensation to petitioner based on the parties' stipulations. *See* Decision, ECF No. 32.

On November 7, 2017, petitioner filed a Motion for Attorneys' Fees and Costs. Motion for Fees, ECF No. 27. Petitioner requests attorneys' fees in the amount of \$16,692.30, and attorneys'

¹ Because this unpublished decision contains a reasoned explanation for the action in this case, I intend to post this decision on the United States Court of Federal Claims' website, in accordance with the E-Government Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-347, § 205, 116 Stat. 2899, 2913 (codified as amended at 44 U.S.C. § 3501 note (2012)). In accordance with Vaccine Rule 18(b), a party has 14 days to identify and move to delete medical or other information, that satisfies the criteria in 42 U.S.C. § 300aa-12(d)(4)(B). Further, consistent with the rule requirement, a motion for redaction must include a proposed redacted decision. If, upon review, I agree that the identified material fits within the requirements of that provision, I will delete such material from public access.

² National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-660, 100 Stat. 3755. Hereinafter, for ease of citation, all "§" references to the Vaccine Act will be to the pertinent subparagraph of 42 U.S.C. § 300aa (2012).

costs in the amount of \$914.69, for a total amount of \$17,606.99. *Id.* at 4. In accordance with General Order #9, petitioner's counsel represents that petitioner incurred \$400.00 in out-of-pocket expenses. *Id.*

On November 21, 2017, respondent filed a response to petitioners' Motion for Fees. Response, ECF No. 29 Respondent provided no specific objection to the amount requested or hours worked, but instead, "respectfully recommend[ed] that the Special Master exercise her discretion and determine a reasonable award for attorneys' fees and costs." *Id.* at 3. Petitioner did not file a reply.

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).

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

The requested hourly forum rates are consistent with the rates previously found to be reasonable in cases involving Mr. Mark Krueger, Mr. Andrew Krueger, and Ms. Renee Nehring. See *Herrera v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, No. 15-651V, 2017 WL 1459002 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Mar. 29, 2017). Therefore, the undersigned finds the requested rates to be reasonable.

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).

³ The fee schedules are posted on the Court's website. See Office of Special Masters, *Attorneys' Forum Hourly Rate Fee Schedule: 2015-2016*, <http://www.uscfc.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/Attorneys-Forum-Rate-Fee-Schedule2015-2016.pdf> (last visited January 24, 2018); Office of Special Masters, *Attorneys' Forum Hourly Rate Fee Schedule: 2017*, <http://www.uscfc.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/Attorneys-Forum-Rate-Fee-Schedule2017.pdf> (last visited January 24, 2018).

Upon review of petitioner's application, the undersigned noted that petitioner's counsel billed time for tasks which had not yet been completed. For example, Mr. Andrew Krueger billed 0.20 hours for "Review Decision" on October 12, 2017, when the special master's decision was not issued until January 16, 2018. Motion for Fees at 11. Similarly, Mr. Krueger also billed 0.4 hours for "Draft and E-File Joint Notice Not to Seek Review" and 0.40 hours for "Draft and E-File Election to Accept Judgment" on October 12, 2017 – approximately 3 months before there was a decision or a judgment issued in this matter. *Id.* Mr. Krueger also billed 3 hours for "Draft Fee Application and anticipated time for Reply," yet no reply was filed in this matter. *Id.* Mr. Krueger is cautioned to refrain from "pre-billing" hours in future fee applications, and wait to file his fee application until after these tasks are completed, so that he does not bill for tasks that are not done. Further instances of this practice will result in a reduction of attorneys' fees.

C. Reasonable Costs

Petitioner requested a total of \$914.69 in attorneys' costs. *See* Motion for Fees, ECF No. 27-1. The requested costs consist of costs associated with obtaining medical records. *Id.* The undersigned finds petitioner's requested costs to be reasonable.

III. Total Award Summary

Based on the foregoing, the undersigned **awards the total of \$18,006.99⁴ as follows:**

- **\$17,606.99 representing reimbursement for attorneys' fees and costs**, with attorneys' fees in the amount of \$16,692.30 and costs in the amount of \$914.69, in the form of a check made payable jointly to petitioner and petitioner's counsel, Andrew Krueger, Esq, and
- **\$400.00 representing reimbursement for out-of-pocket expenses**, in the form of a check made payable to petitioner, Debra Baker.

The Clerk of the Court is directed to enter judgment in accordance with this Decision.⁵

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/ Mindy Michaels Roth

Mindy Michaels Roth
Special Master

⁴ This amount is intended to cover all legal expenses incurred in this matter. This award encompasses all charges by the attorney against a client, "advanced costs" as well as fees for legal services rendered. Furthermore, § 15(e)(3) prevents an attorney from charging or collecting fees (including costs) that would be in addition to the amount awarded herein. *See generally Beck v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 924 F.2d 1029 (Fed. Cir. 1991).

⁵ Pursuant to Vaccine Rule 11(a), entry of judgment can be expedited by each party filing a notice renouncing the right to seek review.