

In the United States Court of Federal Claims

OFFICE OF SPECIAL MASTERS

No. 18-1266V

Filed: September 27, 2019

UNPUBLISHED

TINA FURLANO,

Petitioner,

v.

SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES,

Respondent.

Special Processing Unit (SPU);
Attorneys' Fees and Costs

*Bridget Candace McCullough, Muller Brazil, LLP, Dresher, PA, for petitioner.
Colleen Clemons Hartley, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC, for respondent.*

DECISION ON ATTORNEYS' FEES AND COSTS¹

Dorsey, Chief Special Master:

On August 22, 2018, Tina Furlano ("petitioner") filed a petition for compensation under the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program, 42 U.S.C. §300aa-10, *et seq.*,² (the "Vaccine Act"). Petitioner alleges that she suffered a left shoulder injury related to vaccine administration ("SIRVA") as a result of an influenza ("flu") vaccine she received on October 4, 2016. Petition at 1. On September 6, 2019, the undersigned issued a decision awarding compensation to petitioner based on the respondent's proffer. ECF No. 29.

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 Because this unpublished decision contains a reasoned explanation for the action in this case, the undersigned is required to post it on the United States Court of Federal Claims'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. Hereinafter, for ease of citation, all "§" references to the Vaccine Act will be to the pertinent subparagraph of 42 U.S.C. § 300aa (2012).

On September 13, 2019, petitioner filed a motion for attorneys' fees and costs. ECF No. 34. Petitioner requests attorneys' fees in the amount of \$8,381.40 and attorneys' costs in the amount of \$872.29. *Id.* at 2. In compliance with General Order #9, petitioner filed a signed statement indicating that petitioner incurred no out-of-pocket expenses. ECF No. 33. Thus, the total amount requested is \$9,253.69.

On September 13, 2019, respondent filed a response to petitioner's motion. ECF No. 34. Respondent argues that "[n]either the Vaccine Act nor Vaccine Rule 13 requires respondent to file a response to a request by a petitioner for an award of attorneys' fees and costs." *Id.* at 1. Respondent adds, however, that he "is satisfied the statutory requirements for an award of attorneys' fees and costs are met in this case." *Id.* at 2. Respondent "respectfully recommends that the Chief Special Master exercise her discretion and determine a reasonable award for attorneys' fees and costs." *Id.* at 3.

By email correspondence on September 13, 2019, counsel for petitioner notified the staff attorney managing the case, copying respondents' counsel, that petitioner did not intend to file a reply.

The undersigned has reviewed the billing records submitted with petitioner's request and finds a reduction in the amount of fees to be awarded appropriate for the reasons listed below.

I. Legal Standard

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorneys' fees and costs. § 15(e). Counsel must submit fee requests that include contemporaneous and specific billing records indicating the service performed, the number of hours expended on the service, and the name of the person performing the service. *See Savin v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 85 Fed. Cl. 313, 316-18 (2008). Counsel should not include in their fee requests hours that are "excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary." *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)). 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." *Id.* at 1522. Furthermore, the special master may reduce a fee request *sua sponte*, apart from objections raised by respondent and without providing a petitioner notice and opportunity to respond. *See Sabella v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 86 Fed. Cl. 201, 209 (2009). A special master need not engaged in a line-by-line analysis of petitioner's fee application when reducing fees. *Broekelschen v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 102 Fed. Cl. 719, 729 (2011).

The petitioner "bears the burden of establishing the hours expended, the rates charged, and the expenses incurred." *Wasson v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 24 Cl. Ct. at 482, 484 (1991). She "should present adequate proof [of the attorneys' fees and costs sought] at the time of the submission." *Id.* at 484 n.1. Petitioner's counsel

“should make a good faith effort to exclude from a fee request hours that are excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary, just as a lawyer in private practice ethically is obligated to exclude such hours from his fee submission.” *Hensley*, 461 U.S., at 434.

II. Attorney Fees

A. Hourly Rates

i. Paralegal Rates

Petitioner requests compensation for paralegal Tereza Pavlacsek the rate of \$140 per hour for time billed in 2018. The paralegals of Muller Brazil have previously been awarded the rate of \$125 per hour for time billed in 2018. The undersigned reduces the 2018 rate for Ms. Pavlacsek to the previously awarded rate of \$125 per hour. This results in a reduction of attorney fees requested in the amount of **\$28.50**.³

B. Paralegal Tasks at Attorney Rates

Upon review of the attorney fee invoices, petitioner requests 1 hour of compensation for tasks billed by attorney Bridget McCullough that are considered more paralegal in nature. Examples of these include:

- August 22, 2018 (0.40 hrs) “Format and Prepare Petition and Exhibits for Filing”
- November 8, 2018 (0.10 hr) “File Exhibit 13 on CM/ECF” Records and Exhibit 18”
- September 5, 2019 (1.0 hr) “File Exhibit 14: Workers’ Compensation Payments”

ECF No. 34 at 7-8.⁴

Attorneys may be compensated for paralegal-level work, but at a rate that is comparable to what would be paid for a paralegal. *See, e.g. Doe/11 v. Sec’y of Health & Human Servs.*, No. XX-XXXV, 2010 WL 529425, at *9-10 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Jan. 29, 2010) (citing *Missouri v. Jenkins*, 491 U.S. 274, 288 (1989)); *Mostovoy v. Sec’y of Health & Human Servs.*, No. 02-10V, 2016 WL 720969, at *5 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Feb. 4, 2016); *Riggins v. Sec’y of Health & Human Servs.*, 99-382V, 2009 WL 3319818, at *20-21 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. June 15, 2009); *Turpin v. Sec’y of Health & Human Servs.*, No. 99-535, 2008 WL 5747914, at *5-7 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Dec. 23, 2008). The undersigned reduces the rate for these tasks from the attorney rate of \$225 per hour to the paralegal rate of \$125 per hour for 2018 and \$140 per hour for tasks billed in 2019.

³ This amount consists of $\$140 - \$125 = \$15 \times 1.9 \text{ hrs} = \28.50

⁴ These are examples and not a comprehensive list.

This results in an overall reduction of attorney fees in the amount of **\$95.50**.⁵

III. Attorney Costs

Petitioner requests compensation of attorneys' costs in the amount of \$872.29. The undersigned finds the overall amount of costs reasonable and awards the amount requested in full.

IV. Conclusion

Based on the reasonableness of petitioner's request, the undersigned **GRANTS IN PART** petitioner's motion for attorneys' fees and costs.

Accordingly, the undersigned awards the total of \$9,129.69⁶ as a lump sum in the form of a check jointly payable to petitioner and petitioner's counsel Bridget Candace McCullough.

The clerk of the court shall enter judgment in accordance herewith.⁷

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/Nora Beth Dorsey

Nora Beth Dorsey
Chief Special Master

⁵ This amount consists of \$350 - \$75 = \$275 x 5.7 hrs = \$1,567.50.

⁶ 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).

⁷ Pursuant to Vaccine Rule 11(a), entry of judgment can be expedited by the parties' joint filing of notice renouncing the right to seek review.