

In the United States Court of Federal Claims

OFFICE OF SPECIAL MASTERS

No. 19-952

Filed: October 28, 2025

* * * * *

DONNA BELL, *

Petitioner, *

v. *

Decision on Attorneys' Fees and Costs

SECRETARY OF HEALTH *

AND HUMAN SERVICES, *

Respondent. *

* * * * *

Heather M. Bonnet-Hebert, Feingold Bonnet-Hebert, P.C., New Bedford, MA, for petitioner.

Catherine Elizabeth Stolar, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC, for respondent.

DECISION ON ATTORNEYS' FEES AND COSTS¹

Roth, Special Master:

On July 1, 2019, Donna Bell filed a petition for compensation under the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program.² Petitioner alleged that she suffered from a left shoulder injury related to vaccine administration ("SIRVA") and lymphedema after receiving an influenza ("flu") vaccine on October 18, 2016. Petition, ECF No. 1. On October 21, 2024, the parties filed a stipulation, which the undersigned adopted as her decision awarding compensation on October 22, 2024. (ECF No. 62).

On May 30, 2025, petitioner filed an application for final attorneys' fees and costs. ("Fees App.") (ECF No. 67). Petitioner requests total attorneys' fees and costs in the amount of

¹ Because this decision contains a reasoned explanation for the action taken in this case, it must be made publicly accessible and will be posted on the United States Court of Federal Claims' website, and/or at <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/collection/uscourts/national/cofc>, in accordance with the E-Government Act of 2002. 44 U.S.C. § 3501 note (2018) (Federal Management and Promotion of Electronic Government Services). 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 finds that the identified material fits within this definition, such material will be redacted 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 (2018).

\$35,471.39, representing \$34,877.30 in attorneys' fees and \$594.09 in attorneys' costs. Fees App. at 1. Pursuant to General Order No. 9, petitioner warrants that she did not personally incur any costs pursuing this claim. ECF No. 66. Respondent responded to the motion on January 13, 2025, 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, 4 (ECF No. 68). Petitioner did not file a reply.

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

Petitioners request the following hourly rates for the work of his counsel, Ms. Heather M. Bonnet-Hebert: \$315.00 per hour for work performed in 2017, \$325.00 per hour for work performed in 2018, \$340.00 per hour for work performed in 2019, \$365.00 per hour for work performed in 2020, \$380.00 per hour for work performed in 2021, \$400.00 per hour for work performed in 2022, \$417.00 per hour for work performed in 2023, \$432.00 per hour for work performed in 2024, and \$462.00 per hour for work performed in 2025. The rates requested through 2024 are consistent with what Ms. Bonnet-Hebert has been previously awarded for her Vaccine Program work, and the undersigned finds them to be reasonable herein. The newly requested hourly rate for work performed by Ms. Bonnet-Hebert for 2025 is also reasonable and shall be awarded as requested.

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

³ The OSM Attorneys’ Forum Hourly Rate Fee Schedules are available on the U.S. Court of Federal Claims website 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).

(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 are reasonable. Therefore, petitioner is entitled to a final award of attorneys’ fees in the amount of \$34,877.30.

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 \$594.09 in costs for acquiring medical records, postage, the Court's filing fee, and photocopies. Fees App. Ex. A at 19-20; Ex. B. Petitioner has provided adequate documentation supporting the requested costs and all appear reasonable in the undersigned’s experience. Accordingly, petitioner is entitled to final attorneys’ costs of \$594.09.

III. Conclusion

In accordance with the foregoing, petitioner’s motion for attorneys’ fees and costs is **GRANTED**. The undersigned hereby awards the following: **a lump sum of \$35,471.39, representing reimbursement for Petitioner’s attorneys’ fees and costs, to be paid through an ACH deposit to Petitioner’s counsel’s IOLTA account for prompt disbursement.**

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.⁴

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/Mindy Michaels Roth

Mindy Michaels Roth
Special Master

⁴ Entry of judgment can be expedited by each party’s filing of a notice renouncing the right to seek review. Vaccine Rule 11(a).