

In the United States Court of Federal Claims
OFFICE OF SPECIAL MASTERS
No. 20-0465V

SHOSHANA ROBUCK,

Petitioner,

v.

SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES,

Respondent.

Chief Special Master Corcoran

Filed: January 23, 2025

*Leah VaSahnja Durant, Law Offices of Leah V. Durant, PLLC, Washington, DC, for
Petitioner.*

Debra A. Filteau Begley, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC, for Respondent.

DECISION ON ATTORNEY'S FEES AND COSTS¹

On April 20, 2020, Shoshana Robuck 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 shoulder injury related to vaccine administration ("SIRVA") as a result of an influenza vaccine administered to her on January 25, 2019. Petition at 1. On April 18, 2024, I issued a decision awarding damages to Petitioner, based on the Respondent's proffer. ECF No. 51.

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, I agree that the identified material fits within this definition, I will redact 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 section references to the Vaccine Act will be to the pertinent subparagraph of 42 U.S.C. § 300aa (2018).

Petitioner has now filed a motion for attorney's fees and costs, requesting an award of \$38,586.15 (representing \$36,885.60 for attorney's fees and \$1,700.55 for attorney's costs). Petitioner Application for Attorneys' Fees, filed Nov. 19, 2024, ECF No. 45. In accordance with General Order No. 9, counsel for Petitioner represents that Petitioner incurred no out-of-pocket expenses. *Id.* at 2. Respondent did not file a response.

Having reviewed of the billing records submitted with Petitioner's requests, I find reductions in the amount of fees and costs to be awarded appropriate, for the reasons listed below.

ANALYSIS

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorney's fees and costs to successful claimants. Section 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 & Hum. 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 & Hum. 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 & Hum. Servs.*, 86 Fed. Cl. 201, 209 (2009). A special master need not engage in a line-by-line analysis of petitioner's fee application when reducing fees. *Broekelschen v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. 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 & Hum. Servs.*, 24 Cl. Ct. 482, 484 (1991). The Petitioner "should present adequate proof [of the attorney's fees and costs sought] at the time of the submission." *Wasson*, 24 Cl. Ct. 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.

ATTORNEY FEES

The rates requested for work performed through the end of 2024 are reasonable and consistent with our prior determinations, and will therefore be adopted. However, a few of the tasks performed by Ms. Durant are more properly billed using a paralegal rate.³ “Tasks that can be completed by a paralegal or a legal assistant should not be billed at an attorney’s rate.” *Riggins v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 99-382V, 2009 WL 3319818, at *21 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. June 15, 2009). “[T]he rate at which such work is compensated turns not on who ultimately performed the task but instead turns on the nature of the task performed.” *Doe/11 v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. XX-XXXXV, 2010 WL 529425, at *9 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Jan. 29, 2010). **This reduces the amount of fees to be awarded by \$398.50.**⁴

Regarding the time billed, I deem the *total* amount of time devoted to briefing entitlement to be excessive – although not egregiously so. See Petitioner’s Motion for a Ruling on the Record, filed Sept. 20, 2021, ECF No. 24; Petitioner’s Reply to Respondent’s Response to Petitioner’s Motion for Ruling on the Record, filed Oct. 29, 2021, ECF No. 27. Petitioner’s counsel expended approximately 11.5 hours drafting the entitlement brief and 16.0 hours drafting the reply brief, totaling 27.5⁵ hours. ECF No. 45-1 at 6.

It is unreasonable for counsel to spend so much time briefing the issue of entitlement in this case, where the issues presented are not complex. I have identified numerous cases (which may reasonably be compared to time spent in this matter),⁶ in which attorneys have accomplished this task in about half the time.⁷ See, e.g., *Fletcher v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-0127V (Apr. 25, 2024) (12.7 and 9.0 hours billed for drafting an entitlement brief and responsive entitlement brief, respectively); *Lamine v.*

³ These entries, drafting basic documents such as an exhibit list, cover sheet, notice of filing, and statement of completion, are dated as follows: 9/9/15/1/20 (two entries), 7/27/20 (two entries), 2/5/21, 2/11/21 (two entries). ECF No. 45-1 at 3-5.

⁴ This amount consists of $(\$395 - \$168) \times 1.1 \text{ hrs.} + (\$420 - \$172) \times 0.6 \text{ hrs.} = \398.50 .

⁵ This total is calculated as follows: 27.5 hours billed on 9/9/21, 9/16/21, 9/20/21, 10/22/21, 10/25/21, 10/26/21, and 10/29/21, by Richard Amada, at a rate of \$400. ECF No. 45-1 at 6.

⁶ Special masters may use comparisons to attorneys performing similar tasks to determine if hours are excessive. See *Saxton v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 3 F.3d 1517, 1518-1521 (Fed. Cir. 1993).

⁷ These decisions can be found on the United States Court of Federal Claims website, and/or at <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/collection/uscourts/national/cofc> (last visited Mar. 24, 2024).

Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs., No. 20-1560V (Mar. 27, 2024) (8.9 and 7.2 hours billed for drafting an entitlement brief and responsive entitlement brief, respectively); *Davenport v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-0206V (Mar. 25, 2024) (16.5 and 2.6 hours billed for drafting an entitlement brief and a responsive entitlement brief, respectively); *Graczyk v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-0376V (Feb. 9, 2024) (5.8 and 8.3 hours billed for drafting an entitlement brief and responsive entitlement brief, respectively); *Sisneros v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-2070V (Feb. 8, 2024) (0.8 and 10.5 hours billed for drafting an entitlement brief and responsive entitlement brief, respectively); *Strand v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-0365V (Feb. 5, 2024) (7.9 and 7.2 hours billed for drafting an entitlement brief and a responsive entitlement brief, respectively); *Griswold v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 19-1674V (May 30, 2024) (5.0 and 2.0 hours billed for drafting an entitlement brief and responsive entitlement brief, respectively); *McCallum v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 19-1991V (May 19, 2023) (8 hours billed for drafting an entitlement brief); *Weso v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 19-0596V (May 16, 2024) (6.0 and 1.1 hours billed for drafting an entitlement brief and responsive entitlement brief, respectively).

Of course, having prevailed in this case, a fees award is generally appropriate. ECF No. 44. But the Act permits only an award of a *reasonable amount of* attorney's fees. Accordingly, I will reduce the sum to be awarded for entitlement briefing (**a total of 30.5 hours, or \$11,000.00**) by *twenty percent*.⁸ Such an across-the-board reduction (which I am empowered to adopt)⁹ fairly captures the overbilling evidenced by this work, without requiring me to act as a "green eye-shaded accountant" in identifying with specificity each objectionable task relevant to this one sub-area of work performed on the case. **This results in a reduction of \$2,200.00.**¹⁰

ATTORNEY COSTS

Petitioner has provided supporting documentation for all claimed costs. ECF No. 45-2. And Respondent offered no specific objection to the rates or amounts sought. Thus,

⁸Because the amount of excessive hours was not as egregious as in previous cases, I will reduce the hours billed by a lower amount than I otherwise would apply. See, e.g., *Callejas v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-1767V, 2023 WL 9288086 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Oct. 24, 2023).

⁹ Special masters are permitted to employ percentage reductions to hours billed, provided the reduction is sufficiently explained. See, e.g., *Abbott v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 135 Fed. Cl. 107, 111 (2017); *Raymo v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 129 Fed. Cl. 691, 702-704 (2016); *Sabella v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, 86 Fed. Cl. 201, 214 (2009).

¹⁰ This amount is calculated as follows: 27.5 hrs. x \$400 x .20 = \$2,200.00.

I find the amount of costs sought to be reasonable.

CONCLUSION

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorney's fees and costs for successful claimants. Section 15(e). Accordingly, I hereby GRANT Petitioner's Motion for attorney's fees and costs. I award a total of **\$35,987.65** (representing **\$34,287.10** for attorney's fees and **\$1,700.55** in costs) to be paid through an ACH deposit to **Petitioner's counsel's IOLTA account for prompt disbursement**. In the absence of a timely-filed motion for review (see Appendix B to the Rules of the Court), the Clerk of Court shall enter judgment in accordance with this Decision.¹¹

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/Brian H. Corcoran

Brian H. Corcoran

Chief Special Master

¹¹ Pursuant to Vaccine Rule 11(a), the parties may expedite entry of judgment by filing a joint notice renouncing their right to seek review.