

In the United States Court of Federal Claims
OFFICE OF SPECIAL MASTERS
No. 21-0982V

CHIH-JUNG CHEN,

Petitioner,

v.

SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES,

Respondent.

Chief Special Master Corcoran

Filed: August 4, 2025

*Catherine Wallace Costigan, Maglio Christopher & Toale, PA, Washington, DC, for
Petitioner.*

Margaret Armstrong, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC, for Respondent.

DECISION ON ATTORNEY'S FEES AND COSTS¹

On February 22, 2021, Chih-Jung Chen 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 alleged that she suffered a shoulder injury related to vaccine administration (“SIRVA”) following an influenza vaccine she received on October 10, 2020. Petition at 1. On April 4, 2025, I issued a decision finding Petitioner entitled to compensation and awarding damages following briefing by the parties. ECF No. 47.

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 \$35,771.77 (representing \$35,097.60 for fees and \$674.17 for costs). Petitioner's Application for Fees and Costs filed Apr. 28, 2025, ECF No. 51. In accordance with General Order No. 9, Petitioner filed a signed statement indicating that she incurred no out-of-pocket expenses. ECF No. 51-2 at 1.

Respondent reacted to the motion on May 12, 2025, representing that he is satisfied that the statutory requirements for an award of attorney's fees and costs are met in this case, but deferring resolution of the amount to be awarded to my discretion. Respondent's Response to Motion at 2-3, 3 n.2, ECF No. 52. Also, on May 12, 2025, Petitioner filed a reply requesting that the amount of fees and costs listed in Petitioner's motion be awarded. ECF No. 53.

Having considered the motion along with the invoices and other proof filed in connection, I find reductions in the amount of fees and costs to be awarded appropriate, for the reasons set forth below.

ANALYSIS

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorney's fees and costs. 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. For work performed by Ms. Costigan in 2025, Petitioner is requesting the hourly rate of \$435.00, representing an increase of \$40.00 from the previous year. ECF No. 51-5 at 16-17. Although a larger increase than I usually would approve, I find this 2025 rate is reasonable and within the OSM fee schedule for attorneys with Ms. Costigan's experience.³ Thus, I will award the requested 2025 rate.

However, a few of the tasks performed by Ms. Costigan are more properly billed using a paralegal rate.⁴ "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 \$75.00.**⁵

Regarding the number of hours billed, I deem the *total* amount of time devoted to briefing entitlement and damages to be excessive. See Petitioner's Memorandum of Law in Support of Findings of Fact Addressing Onset, filed Jan. 11, 2024, ECF No. 43; Petitioner's Reply to Respondent's Response to Memorandum of Law in Support of Findings of Fact, filed March 14, 2024, ECF No. 45. Petitioner's counsel expended approximately 31.6 hours drafting the entitlement and damages briefing and 10.1 hours drafting a reply, totaling 41.7⁶ hours. ECF No. 51-5 at 11-15.

³ The 2025 Attorney's Forum Hourly Rate Fee Schedule is available on the U.S. Court of Federal Claim's website: <https://www.uscfc.uscourts.gov/osm-attorneys-forum-hourly-rate-fee-schedules>.

⁴ These entries, drafting basic documents such as an exhibit list, notice of filings, statement of completion, joint notice not to seek review, and election to accept judgment are dated as follows: 11/27/23 and 1/10/24. ECF No. 51-5 at 14.

⁵ This amount consists of $(\$370 - \$186) \times 0.3 \text{ hrs.} + (\$395 - \$197) \times 0.1 \text{ hrs.} = \75.00 .

⁶ This total is calculated as follows: 23.6 hours billed on 4/30/23, 5/1/23, 7/19/23, 7/24/23 (two entries),

My above calculation does not include time spent performing research and preparing the initial demand which would have informed this later work, and I am therefore awarding fees associated with that task in full. ECF No. 51-5 at 9-10. Nor am I counting time spent communicating with Petitioner and preparing additional supporting documentation such as affidavits or signed declarations, which is also being awarded in full. See, e.g., *id.* at 14 (entry dated 11/21/23).

It is unreasonable for counsel to spend so much time briefing, even the matter of both entitlement and damages 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),⁷ in which attorneys have accomplished this task in about half the time.⁸

8/7/23, 11/16/23 (three entries), 11/17/23, 11/19/23 (two entries), 11/20/23, and 11/27/23, by Catherine Costigan at a rate of \$370; and 18.1 hours billed on 1/2/24, 1/4/24 (two entries), 1/9/24, 1/10/24 (two entries), 3/11/24, 3/12/24 (four entries), and 3/14/24, by Catherine Costigan at a rate of \$395. ECF No. 51-5 at 11-15.

⁷ 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).

⁸ See, e.g., *Creedon v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-0309V (June 18, 2025) (8.9 and 6.0 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *Miller v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 22-0594V (June 13, 2025) (17.0 and 6.8 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *Kelly v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-2202V (June 13, 2025) (16.3 and 4.4 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *Krebs v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-0484V (June 13, 2025) (14.5 and 6.2 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *Field v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-1958V (June 13, 2025) (9.5 and 4.6 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *Donovan v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 22-0306V (June 12, 2025) (16.6 and 10.6 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *Luk v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 23-0191V (June 11, 2025) (12.4 and 3.5 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *Shields v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-1970V (Jan. 27, 2025) (19.3 and 2.9 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *Vaccaro v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-1704V (Jan. 27, 2025) (8.6 and 4.4 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *Schwalm v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-0066V (Dec. 2, 2024) (12.2 and 6.9 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *Stanton v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-0360V (Nov. 25, 2024) (15.9 and 4.5 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *Hirsch v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-1110V (Nov. 25, 2024) (16.0 and 4.1 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *Templin v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-1446V (Nov. 25, 2024) (12.0 and 0.4 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *Kleinschmidt v. Sec'y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-0680V (Apr. 9, 2024) (13.9 and 4.8 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief,

Of course, having prevailed in this case, a fees award is generally appropriate. *Chen v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-0982V, 2025 WL 1454103 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Apr. 4, 2024) (also found at ECF No. 47). But the Act permits only an award of a *reasonable amount of attorney’s fees*. The only issues being contested were pain onset and the appropriate amount of pain and suffering. *Id.* at *4, 7; see 42 C.F.R. § 100.3(a)(XIV)(B) & (c)(10)(ii) (required pain onset). Although Respondent failed to propose an exact amount for pain and suffering, he did propose comparable cases with awards ranging from \$35,000.00 to \$60,000.00. *Chen*, 2025 WL 1454103, at *7. Petitioner proposed an award of \$70,000.00. *Id.* My decision awarding \$55,000.00 in pain and suffering, an amount with the range proposed by Respondent, albeit towards the higher amount proposed, underscores the futile nature of Petitioner’s argument on this issue. But it is countered by Respondent’s similarly ineffective onset objection. Still, the circumstances of this case did not warrant devoting so much *time* to briefing.

Accordingly, I will reduce the sum to be awarded for entitlement damages briefing **(a total of 41.7 hours, or \$15,881.50)** by *thirty percent*. 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

respectively); *Amor v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-0978V (Apr. 10, 2024) (11.9 and 2.7 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *McGraw v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-0072V (Apr. 1, 2024) (17.4 and 9.6 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *Wilson-Blount v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-1400V (Oct. 25, 2023) (14.2 and 7.4 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *Bidlack v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-0093V (Oct. 25, 2023) (9.4 and 6.8 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *Johnson v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 19-1543V (Aug. 17, 2023) (17.8 and 9.7 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *Piccolotti v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-0135V (June 8, 2023) (11.6 and 3.8 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively); *Merson v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 18-0589V (May 18, 2023) (9.8 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief – although some time was doubtlessly saved by my March 9, 2020 factual ruling finding an appropriate pain onset); *C.H. v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 20-0249V (May 16, 2023) (12.9 and 6.1 hours billed for drafting an entitlement and damages brief and responsive entitlement and damages brief, respectively). These decisions can (or will) 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 Dec. 6, 2024).

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).

on the case. **This results in a reduction of \$4,764.45.**¹⁰

ATTORNEY COSTS

Petitioner requests \$674.17 in overall costs and has provided receipts for all expenses. ECF No. 51-4 at 1-17. I have reviewed the requested costs and find them to be reasonable. And Respondent offered no specific objection to the rates or amounts sought. ECF No. 52.

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 **\$30,932.32 (representing \$30,258.15 for fees and \$674.17 for 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

¹⁰ This amount is calculated as follows: (23.6 hrs. x \$370 + 18.1 hrs. x \$395) x .30 = \$4,764.45.

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.