SOCIAL SECURITY’S MEDICAL-VOCATIONAL GUIDELINES

By: Elliott Andalman, Attorney at Law
and Ariele Hausner, Paralegal
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The Social Security Administration (SSA) follows a 5-step sequential evaluation process, as set out in 20 C.F.R. §404.1520, to determine disability. Step four and five of this process involves evaluating your ability to do work. At step four SSA must decide whether you can return to your past relevant work, which is work performed in the last 15 years. If you cannot perform your past relevant work, then SSA must determine if there are other jobs that exist in the national economy which you can perform.

In evaluating what other jobs you might be able to perform, SSA must evaluate vocational factors, which include age, education, and work history. SSA must follow Medical-Vocational Guidelines (hereinafter the “Guidelines”), as defined in 20 C.F.R. Part 404, Subpart P, Appendix 2 for exertional impairments. For non-exertional impairments, such as emotional impairments, SSA calls a vocational expert to provide testimony.

The Guidelines are organized by restrictions on exertional level that you can perform, i.e. sedentary, light, medium, and heavy work. Sedentary work is the most restrictive category and is defined as lifting no more than 10 pounds at a time and occasionally lifting or carrying small articles. A sedentary job involves sitting approximately 6 hours of an 8-hour day, and standing and walking no more than 2 hours of an 8-hour workday (see Social Security Ruling 83-10). Sedentary jobs most often require use of the hands and fingers for repetitive finger actions (i.e. typing). If you cannot sit at least 6 hours in an 8 hour workday then you may not be able to perform sedentary work. SSA maintains that you can perform sedentary work if you can sit or stand up to 8 hours a day because some jobs provide a “sit-stand option.” Sedentary work also includes being able to stand and walk up to two-thirds of the workday and being able to sit most of the workday and operate arm/hand or leg/foot controls (see Social Security Ruling 83-10).

Light work is work that entails lifting no more than 20 pounds at one time and frequent lifting and carrying objects weighing up to 10 pounds. Medium work entails lifting no more than 50 pounds at a time with frequent lifting or carrying of objects weighing up to 25 pounds.

Once it is determined that you have the residual functional capacity to perform either sedentary, light, medium, or heavy work, then the Guidelines consider your age, education, and job skill level, as well as transferability of job skills, to determine if you can perform work or are disabled.

The basic age categories considered by the Guidelines are advanced age (age 55 and over), closely approaching advanced age (age 50-54), and younger individual (age 18-49). If you are of advanced age, SSA regulations recognize that it is hard for you to be able to transfer skills to a
new vocation. Usually, the Guidelines dictate that you will be found disabled if you are of advanced age, can no longer perform past relevant work, and have no transferable skills.

If you are a younger individual, on the other hand, the Guidelines generally dictate a decision of not disabled if you are limited to sedentary work and are literate in English. A younger individual must be found to be limited to less than sedentary work in order to be found disabled. Otherwise you will be found to be able to adapt to other jobs in the national economy.

By: Elliott Andalman, Attorney at Law – reply via email at eandalman@a-f.net and Ariele Hausner, Paralegal

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