

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF MARYLAND
Southern Division**

JAMES BICKING,

Plaintiff,

v.

**NANCY A. BERRYHILL,
Acting Commissioner of Social Security,**

Defendant.¹

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Civil No. TMD 16-3458

**MEMORANDUM OPINION GRANTING PLAINTIFF’S
ALTERNATIVE MOTION FOR REMAND**

Plaintiff James Bicking seeks judicial review under 42 U.S.C. §§ 405(g) and 1383(c)(3) of a final decision of the Commissioner of Social Security (“Defendant” or the “Commissioner”) denying his applications for disability insurance benefits (“DIB”) and for Supplemental Security Income (“SSI”) under Titles II and XVI of the Social Security Act. Before the Court are Plaintiff’s Motion for Summary Judgment and alternative motion for remand (ECF No. 15) and Defendant’s Motion for Summary Judgment (ECF No. 16).² Plaintiff contends that the administrative record does not contain substantial evidence to support the Commissioner’s

¹ On January 23, 2017, Nancy A. Berryhill became the Acting Commissioner of Social Security. She is, therefore, substituted as Defendant in this matter. *See* 42 U.S.C. § 405(g); Fed. R. Civ. P. 25(d).

² The Fourth Circuit has noted that, “in social security cases, we often use summary judgment as a procedural means to place the district court in position to fulfill its appellate function, not as a device to avoid nontriable issues under usual Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 56 standards.” *Walls v. Barnhart*, 296 F.3d 287, 289 n.2 (4th Cir. 2002). For example, “the denial of summary judgment accompanied by a remand to the Commissioner results in a judgment under sentence four of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g), which is immediately appealable.” *Id.*

decision that he is not disabled. No hearing is necessary. L.R. 105.6. For the reasons that follow, Plaintiff's alternative motion for remand (ECF No. 15) is **GRANTED**.

I

Background

Plaintiff was born in 1962, has a high-school education, and previously worked as a delivery driver. R. at 37. Plaintiff protectively filed applications for DIB and for SSI on March 9, 2012, alleging disability beginning on January 1, 2010 (later amended to June 7, 2010), due to lower back problems, a torn bicep, and depression. R. at 28, 197-214, 224, 248. The Commissioner denied Plaintiff's applications initially and again on reconsideration, so Plaintiff requested a hearing before an Administrative Law Judge ("ALJ"). R. at 134-44, 147-52. On February 20, 2015, ALJ Alfred J. Costanzo held a hearing at which Plaintiff and a vocational expert ("VE") testified. R. at 45-73. On March 11, 2015, the ALJ issued a decision finding Plaintiff not disabled from the amended alleged onset date of disability of June 7, 2010, through the date of the decision. R. at 25-44. Plaintiff sought review of this decision by the Appeals Council, which denied Plaintiff's request for review on August 17, 2016. R. at 1-6, 10. The ALJ's decision thus became the final decision of the Commissioner. *See* 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.981, 416.1481; *see also Sims v. Apfel*, 530 U.S. 103, 106-07, 120 S. Ct. 2080, 2083 (2000).

On October 17, 2016, Plaintiff filed a complaint in this Court seeking review of the Commissioner's decision. Upon the parties' consent, this case was transferred to a United States Magistrate Judge for final disposition and entry of judgment. The case subsequently was reassigned to the undersigned. The parties have briefed the issues, and the matter is now fully submitted.

II

Summary of Evidence

A. Plaintiff's Testimony

The ALJ reviewed Plaintiff's testimony in his decision:

At the hearing, [Plaintiff] testified that he stopped his work as a delivery driver in June 2010, because he started to experience confusion and forget his stops. He also has a history of a torn left bicep and a 2005 back surgery. He had a shunt placed in 2013 to treat a hydrocephalus, and it initially helped his confusion. However, he currently continues to feel confusion, and it varies from day to day. He has nine to ten bad days per month, during which he feels dizzy and cannot do much. On bad days, he also has difficulty with climbing steps and problems with balance while walking. He lies down, so that he does not fall. He has not driven in over a month. His confusion has affected other daily activities, such as cooking, shopping, taking his daughter to the playground, etc. He also has difficulty sleeping, and only sleeps about four to five hours per night. He has trouble remembering things and needs to write notes to himself.

He continues to have abdominal pain since his shunt surgery, and is going to be undergoing more testing. During the day, he gets up if feeling good, and empties the dishwasher. He attempts to do some light housework, but needs breaks to stop and rest. His brother assists him with many things, and gives him reminders. He also has other people calling or stopping by to check on him. He is tired and confused often. He started feeling the fatigue even before he stopped working.

R. at 33-34; *see* R. at 48-66.

B. VE Testimony

The VE testified that a hypothetical individual with Plaintiff's same age, education, and work experience with the residual functional capacity ("RFC") outlined below in Part III could not perform Plaintiff's past relevant work but could perform the unskilled, light jobs of laundry folder or clothes sorter and the sedentary jobs of officer helper or data entry keyer.³ R. at 68-69.

³ "Unskilled work is work which needs little or no judgment to do simple duties that can be learned on the job in a short period of time." 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1568(a), 416.968(a). "Light work involves lifting no more than 20 pounds at a time with frequent lifting or carrying of objects weighing up to 10 pounds." *Id.* §§ 404.1567(b), 416.967(b). "Sedentary work involves

A person “off task” more than 20% of the workday because of memory lapses or confusion could not perform any work, however. R. at 70-71. According to the VE, her testimony was consistent with the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*.⁴ R. at 70.

III

Summary of ALJ’s Decision

On March 11, 2015, the ALJ found that Plaintiff (1) had not engaged in substantial gainful activity since the amended alleged onset date of disability of June 7, 2010; and (2) had an impairment or a combination of impairments considered to be “severe” on the basis of the requirements in the Code of Federal Regulations; but (3) did not have an impairment or a combination of impairments meeting or equaling one of the impairments set forth in 20 C.F.R. pt. 404, subpt. P, app. 1; and (4) was unable to perform his past relevant work; but (5) could perform other work in the national economy, such as a laundry folder, clothes sorter, office helper, or data entry keyer. R. at 30-38. The ALJ thus found that he was not disabled from June 7, 2010, through the date of the decision. R. at 38.

In so finding, the ALJ found that, with regard to concentration, persistence or pace, Plaintiff had moderate difficulties. R. at 32. The ALJ then found that Plaintiff had the RFC

to perform light work as defined in 20 CFR 404.1567(b) and 416.967(b), except he cannot engage in climbing of ladders, ropes, or scaffolds, balancing, or

lifting no more than 10 pounds at a time and occasionally lifting or carrying articles like docket files, ledgers, and small tools.” *Id.* §§ 404.1567(a), 416.967(a).

⁴ “The Social Security Administration has taken administrative notice of the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*, which is published by the Department of Labor and gives detailed physical requirements for a variety of jobs.” *Massachi v. Astrue*, 486 F.3d 1149, 1152 n.8 (9th Cir. 2007); *see Pearson v. Colvin*, 810 F.3d 204, 205 n.1 (4th Cir. 2015); *DeLoatche v. Heckler*, 715 F.2d 148, 151 n.2 (4th Cir. 1983); 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1566(d)(1), 416.966(d)(1). “Information contained in the [*Dictionary of Occupational Titles*] is not conclusive evidence of the existence of jobs in the national economy; however, it can be used to establish a rebuttable presumption.” *English v. Shalala*, 10 F.3d 1080, 1085 (4th Cir. 1993).

crawling. He can perform all other postural activities no more than occasionally. He can perform only occasional overhead reaching, pushing, and pulling with the left upper extremity. He is limited to simple, routine, repetitive tasks, and must work in a stable work environment, with only occasional change in the work process. He can have no more than occasional and superficial interaction with co-workers and the public. He cannot be exposed to heights or hazards, including dangerous machinery (i.e. driving vehicles). He cannot perform fast-paced production work.

R. at 33. The ALJ considered Plaintiff's credibility and found that his "medically determinable impairments could reasonably be expected to cause the alleged symptoms; however, [his] statements concerning the intensity, persistence and limiting effects of these symptoms are not entirely credible for the reasons explained in this decision." R. at 34.

IV

Disability Determinations and Burden of Proof

The Social Security Act defines a disability as the inability to engage in any substantial gainful activity by reason of any medically determinable physical or mental impairment that can be expected to result in death or that has lasted or can be expected to last for a continuous period of not less than twelve months. 42 U.S.C. §§ 423(d)(1)(A), 1382c(a)(3)(A); 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1505, 416.905. A claimant has a disability when the claimant is "not only unable to do his previous work but cannot, considering his age, education, and work experience, engage in any other kind of substantial gainful work which exists . . . in significant numbers either in the region where such individual lives or in several regions of the country." 42 U.S.C. §§ 423(d)(2)(A), 1382c(a)(3)(B).

To determine whether a claimant has a disability within the meaning of the Social Security Act, the Commissioner follows a five-step sequential evaluation process outlined in the regulations. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520, 416.920; *see Barnhart v. Thomas*, 540 U.S. 20, 24-25, 124 S. Ct. 376, 379-380 (2003). "If at any step a finding of disability or nondisability can be made,

the [Commissioner] will not review the claim further.” *Thomas*, 540 U.S. at 24, 124 S. Ct. at 379; *see* 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4), 416.920(a)(4). The claimant has the burden of production and proof at steps one through four. *See Bowen v. Yuckert*, 482 U.S. 137, 146 n.5, 107 S. Ct. 2287, 2294 n.5 (1987); *Radford v. Colvin*, 734 F.3d 288, 291 (4th Cir. 2013).

First, the Commissioner will consider a claimant’s work activity. If the claimant is engaged in substantial gainful activity, then the claimant is not disabled. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(i), 416.920(a)(4)(i).

Second, if the claimant is not engaged in substantial gainful activity, the Commissioner looks to see whether the claimant has a “severe” impairment, i.e., an impairment or combination of impairments that significantly limits the claimant’s physical or mental ability to do basic work activities. *Pass v. Chater*, 65 F.3d 1200, 1203 (4th Cir. 1995); *see* 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(c), 404.1521(a), 416.920(c), 416.921(a).⁵

Third, if the claimant has a severe impairment, then the Commissioner will consider the medical severity of the impairment. If the impairment meets or equals one of the presumptively disabling impairments listed in the regulations, then the claimant is considered disabled, regardless of age, education, and work experience. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(iii), 404.1520(d), 416.920(a)(4)(iii), 416.920(d); *see Radford*, 734 F.3d at 293.

Fourth, if the claimant’s impairment is severe, but it does not meet or equal one of the presumptively disabling impairments, then the Commissioner will assess the claimant’s RFC to

⁵ The ability to do basic work activities is defined as “the abilities and aptitudes necessary to do most jobs.” 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1521(b), 416.921(b). These abilities and aptitudes include (1) physical functions such as walking, standing, sitting, lifting, pushing, pulling, reaching, carrying, or handling; (2) capacities for seeing, hearing, and speaking; (3) understanding, carrying out, and remembering simple instructions; (4) use of judgment; (5) responding appropriately to supervision, co-workers, and usual work situations; and (6) dealing with changes in a routine work setting. *Id.* §§ 404.1521(b)(1)-(6), 416.921(b)(1)-(6); *see Yuckert*, 482 U.S. at 141, 107 S. Ct. at 2291.

determine the claimant's "ability to meet the physical, mental, sensory, and other requirements" of the claimant's past relevant work. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(iv), 404.1545(a)(4), 416.920(a)(4)(iv), 416.945(a)(4). RFC is a measurement of the most a claimant can do despite his or her limitations. *Hines v. Barnhart*, 453 F.3d 559, 562 (4th Cir. 2006); *see* 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1545(a)(1), 416.945(a)(1). The claimant is responsible for providing evidence the Commissioner will use to make a finding as to the claimant's RFC, but the Commissioner is responsible for developing the claimant's "complete medical history, including arranging for a consultative examination(s) if necessary, and making every reasonable effort to help [the claimant] get medical reports from [the claimant's] own medical sources." 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1545(a)(3), 416.945(a)(3). The Commissioner also will consider certain non-medical evidence and other evidence listed in the regulations. *See id.* If a claimant retains the RFC to perform past relevant work, then the claimant is not disabled. *Id.* §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(iv), 416.920(a)(4)(iv).

Fifth, if the claimant's RFC as determined in step four will not allow the claimant to perform past relevant work, then the burden shifts to the Commissioner to prove that there is other work that the claimant can do, given the claimant's RFC as determined at step four, age, education, and work experience. *See Hancock v. Astrue*, 667 F.3d 470, 472-73 (4th Cir. 2012). The Commissioner must prove not only that the claimant's RFC will allow the claimant to make an adjustment to other work, but also that the other work exists in significant numbers in the national economy. *See Walls*, 296 F.3d at 290; 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(v), 416.920(a)(4)(v). If the claimant can make an adjustment to other work that exists in significant numbers in the national economy, then the Commissioner will find that the claimant is not

disabled. If the claimant cannot make an adjustment to other work, then the Commissioner will find that the claimant is disabled. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(v), 416.920(a)(4)(v).

V

Substantial Evidence Standard

The Court reviews an ALJ's decision to determine whether the ALJ applied the correct legal standards and whether the factual findings are supported by substantial evidence. *See Craig v. Chater*, 76 F.3d 585, 589 (4th Cir. 1996). In other words, the issue before the Court "is not whether [Plaintiff] is disabled, but whether the ALJ's finding that [Plaintiff] is not disabled is supported by substantial evidence and was reached based upon a correct application of the relevant law." *Id.* The Court's review is deferential, as "[t]he findings of the Commissioner of Social Security as to any fact, if supported by substantial evidence, shall be conclusive." 42 U.S.C. § 405(g). Under this standard, substantial evidence is less than a preponderance but is enough that a reasonable mind would find it adequate to support the Commissioner's conclusion. *See Hancock*, 667 F.3d at 472; *see also Richardson v. Perales*, 402 U.S. 389, 401, 91 S. Ct. 1420, 1427 (1971).

In evaluating the evidence in an appeal of a denial of benefits, the court does "not conduct a *de novo* review of the evidence," *Smith v. Schweiker*, 795 F.2d 343, 345 (4th Cir. 1986), or undertake to reweigh conflicting evidence, make credibility determinations, or substitute its judgment for that of the Commissioner. *Hancock*, 667 F.3d at 472. Rather, "[t]he duty to resolve conflicts in the evidence rests with the ALJ, not with a reviewing court." *Smith v. Chater*, 99 F.3d 635, 638 (4th Cir. 1996). When conflicting evidence allows reasonable minds to differ as to whether a claimant is disabled, the responsibility for that decision falls on the ALJ. *Johnson v. Barnhart*, 434 F.3d 650, 653 (4th Cir. 2005) (per curiam).

VI

Discussion

Plaintiff contends that the ALJ erroneously assessed his RFC contrary to Social Security Ruling⁶ (“SSR”) 96-8p, 1996 WL 374184 (July 2, 1996). Pl.’s Mem. Supp. Mot. Summ. J. 4-8, ECF No. 15-1. Plaintiff maintains that the ALJ failed to perform properly a function-by-function assessment of his ability to perform the physical and mental demands of work because the ALJ failed to evaluate properly pertinent evidence. *Id.* at 6. For the reasons discussed below, the Court remands this case for further proceedings.

SSR 96-8p explains how adjudicators should assess RFC and instructs that the RFC

“assessment must first identify the individual’s functional limitations or restrictions and assess his or her work-related abilities on a function-by-function basis, including the functions” listed in the regulations. “Only after that may [residual functional capacity] be expressed in terms of the exertional levels of work, sedentary, light, medium, heavy, and very heavy.” The Ruling further explains that the residual functional capacity “assessment must include a narrative discussion describing how the evidence supports each conclusion, citing specific medical facts (e.g., laboratory findings) and nonmedical evidence (e.g., daily activities, observations).”

Mascio v. Colvin, 780 F.3d 632, 636 (4th Cir. 2015) (alteration in original) (footnote omitted) (citations omitted). The Fourth Circuit has held, however, that a per se rule requiring remand when the ALJ does not perform an explicit function-by-function analysis “is inappropriate given that remand would prove futile in cases where the ALJ does not discuss functions that are ‘irrelevant or uncontested.’” *Id.* (quoting *Cichocki v. Astrue*, 729 F.3d 172, 177 (2d Cir. 2013))

⁶ Social Security Rulings are “final opinions and orders and statements of policy and interpretations” that the Social Security Administration has adopted. 20 C.F.R. § 402.35(b)(1). Once published, these rulings are binding on all components of the Social Security Administration. *Heckler v. Edwards*, 465 U.S. 870, 873 n.3, 104 S. Ct. 1532, 1534 n.3 (1984); 20 C.F.R. § 402.35(b)(1). “While they do not have the force of law, they are entitled to deference unless they are clearly erroneous or inconsistent with the law.” *Pass*, 65 F.3d at 1204 n.3.

(per curiam)). Rather, remand may be appropriate “where an ALJ fails to assess a claimant’s capacity to perform relevant functions, despite contradictory evidence in the record, or where other inadequacies in the ALJ’s analysis frustrate meaningful review.” *Id.* (quoting *Cichocki*, 729 F.3d at 177). The court in *Mascio* concluded that remand was appropriate because it was “left to guess about how the ALJ arrived at his conclusions on [the claimant’s] ability to perform relevant functions” because the ALJ had “said nothing about [the claimant’s] ability to perform them for a full workday,” despite conflicting evidence as to the claimant’s RFC that the ALJ did not address. *Id.* at 637; see *Monroe v. Colvin*, 826 F.3d 176, 187-88 (4th Cir. 2016) (remanding because ALJ erred in not determining claimant’s RFC using function-by-function analysis; ALJ erroneously expressed claimant’s RFC first and then concluded that limitations caused by claimant’s impairments were consistent with that RFC).

In *Mascio*, the Fourth Circuit held that “an ALJ does not account ‘for a claimant’s limitations in concentration, persistence, and pace by restricting the hypothetical question to simple, routine tasks or unskilled work.’” *Mascio*, 780 F.3d at 638 (quoting *Winschel v. Comm’r of Soc. Sec.*, 631 F.3d 1176, 1180 (11th Cir. 2011)). “[T]he ability to perform simple tasks differs from the ability to stay on task. Only the latter limitation would account for a claimant’s limitation in concentration, persistence, or pace.” *Id.* The court in *Mascio* remanded the case for the ALJ to explain why the claimant’s moderate limitation in concentration, persistence, or pace at step three did not translate into a limitation in the claimant’s RFC. *Id.* In other words, “[p]ursuant to *Mascio*, once an ALJ has made a step three finding that a claimant suffers from moderate difficulties in concentration, persistence, or pace, the ALJ must either include a corresponding limitation in her RFC assessment, or explain why no such limitation is necessary.”

Talmo v. Comm’r, Soc. Sec., Civil Case No. ELH-14-2214, 2015 WL 2395108, at *3 (D. Md. May 19, 2015), *report and recommendation adopted* (D. Md. June 5, 2015).

Here, the ALJ’s hypothetical question to the VE and the corresponding RFC assessment limiting Plaintiff to no “fast-paced production work” (R. at 33; see R. at 68) account for Plaintiff’s moderate difficulties in maintaining concentration, persistence, or pace. *See Reinhardt v. Comm’r, Soc. Sec. Admin.*, Civil No. SAG-16-3227, 2017 WL 2274948, at *2 (D. Md. May 24, 2017). The VE testified, however, that an individual “off task” more than 20% of the workday because of memory lapses or confusion could not perform any work. R. at 70-71. Although “[i]t is reasonable to assume that [Plaintiff’s] moderate limitations translate into a decrease in productivity,” *Sterling v. Colvin*, No. 1:13-CV-01132-SEB, 2014 WL 4328682, at *2 (S.D. Ind. Aug. 29, 2014), the ALJ’s decision failed to address this issue and to explain how, despite Plaintiff’s moderate difficulties in maintaining concentration, persistence, or pace, he could remain productive for at least 80% of the workday. While “there is no rigid requirement that the ALJ specifically refer to every piece of evidence in his decision,” *Reid v. Comm’r of Soc. Sec.*, 769 F.3d 861, 865 (4th Cir. 2014) (quoting *Dyer v. Barnhart*, 395 F.3d 1206, 1211 (11th Cir. 2005) (per curiam)), “the ALJ ‘must build an accurate and logical bridge from the evidence to his conclusion.’” *Monroe*, 826 F.3d at 189 (quoting *Clifford v. Apfel*, 227 F.3d 863, 872 (7th Cir. 2000)). In other words, the ALJ “must build a logical bridge between the limitations he finds and the VE evidence relied upon to carry the Commissioner’s burden at step five in finding that there are a significant number of jobs available to a claimant.” *Brent v. Astrue*, 879 F. Supp. 2d 941, 953 (N.D. Ill. 2012). “If the ALJ believed [Plaintiff’s] moderate limitations would not significantly impact [his] productivity, he needed to articulate why. Without such explanation, his decision is not supported by substantial evidence.” *Sterling*, 2014 WL 4328682, at *3; *see*

Varga v. Colvin, 794 F.3d 809, 815 (7th Cir. 2015) (“It is also problematic that the ALJ failed to define ‘fast paced production.’ Without such a definition, it would have been impossible for the VE to assess whether a person with [the claimant’s] limitations could maintain the pace proposed.”). Because this inadequacy in the ALJ’s analysis frustrates meaningful review, remand is appropriate, and the Court need not address Plaintiff’s remaining arguments. *See Mascio*, 780 F.3d at 636.

VII

Conclusion

For the foregoing reasons, Defendant’s Motion for Summary Judgment (ECF No. 16) is **DENIED**. Plaintiff’s Motion for Summary Judgment (ECF No. 15) is **DENIED**. Plaintiff’s alternative motion for remand (ECF No. 15) is **GRANTED**. Defendant’s final decision is **REVERSED** under the fourth sentence of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g). This matter is **REMANDED** for further proceedings consistent with this opinion. A separate order will issue.

Date: March 19, 2018

/s/
Thomas M. DiGirolamo
United States Magistrate Judge