

Practitioner Toolkit: Vocational Expert Testimony Regarding Functional Limitations with Psychiatric Disabilities

Sonia Peterson & Lisa Busby Thomas

Vocational Experts (VEs) testifying in Social Security Administration (SSA) disability appeal hearings are often asked to provide information on jobs listed in the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT) that are available in significant numbers in the national economy, given the functional limitations of a psychiatric disability. Table 1 lists some definitions of the related functional limitations and suggested guidelines for VEs.

Table 1

Crosswalk of Areas of Functioning, Functional Limitations Used in SSA Hypotheticals Regarding Psychiatric Disabilities, and Descriptions of Available Work per the DOT

	No impairment	Mild	Marked	Extreme
Areas of functioning and definitions	Can function in this area independently, appropriately, effectively and on a sustained basis	Slight limitation in the ability to function independently, appropriately and effectively on a sustained basis	Serious limitation in this area of functioning	No ability to function in this area independently, appropriately, and effectively on a sustained basis
Understanding, remembering, or applying information	No limitations to work	Jobs that require no more than semi-skilled tasks; *SVP 1, 2, 3 or 4; reasoning level no more than 1, 2, or 3	Jobs with simple, repetitive tasks; *SVP 1 or 2; reasoning level 1 or 2; no work with strict production quotas	Person cannot perform even simple, repetitive tasks consistently without extra supervision/accommodations/supported employment services; no work is available
Ability to interact with others	No limitations to work	Jobs that require no more than limited contact with the public	Jobs that do not require contact with the public and that require no more than limited interactions with co-workers and supervisors	Person cannot interact appropriately with the public, co-workers, or supervisors consistently without extra supervision/accommodations/supported employment services; no work is available

Concentration, persistence and maintaining pace	No limitations to work	Jobs that require no more than semi-skilled tasks; *SVP 1, 2, 3 or 4; reasoning level no more than 1, 2, or 3; no work with strict production quotas	Jobs with simple, repetitive tasks; *SVP 1 or 2; reasoning level 1 or 2; and no work with strict production quotas	Person will be off task more than 10% of a work-day in addition to normally scheduled breaks and/or will miss more than 1 day or 8 hours of work per month consistently without extra supervision/accommodations/ supported employment services; no work is available
Ability to adapt or manage oneself	No limitations to work	Jobs that require no more than limited contact with the public; jobs that require no more than semi-skilled tasks; *SVP 1, 2, 3 or 4; reasoning level 1, 2, or 3; no work with strict production quotas	Jobs that do not require contact with the public and that require no more than limited interactions with co-workers and supervisors; jobs with simple, repetitive tasks, *SVP 1 or 2; and no work with strict production quotas	Person is unable to perform activities of daily living consistently without extra supervision/accommodations/ supported employment services; no work is available

*SVP = Specific Vocational Preparation; GED = General Education Development: reasoning, math, language. (Dictionary of Occupational Titles, 2020)

If one or more areas of function are “extremely impaired,” no work is available. Details regarding time off task and missed days/hours of work are not listed in the DOT, and this testimony is based on the VE’s experience. Every situation is unique and requires the expert analysis and testimony of a VE to find any available jobs listed in the DOT that exist in significant numbers in the national economy given the claimant’s past work history, age, and education level.

References and Resources

- Dictionary of Occupational Titles. (2020). *Appendix C: Components of the Definition Trailer*. https://occupationalinfo.org/appendxc_1.html
- Social Security Administration. (2023). 12.00 Mental Disorders – Adult. *Disability Evaluation Under Social Security*. <https://www.ssa.gov/disability/professionals/bluebook/12.00-MentalDisorders-Adult.htm>
- Social Security Administration. (2001). DI 25225.015 How We Will Decide That Your Impairment(s) Functionally Equals The Listings (Section 416.926a[d]). *Program Operations Manual System*. <https://secure.ssa.gov/poms.nsf/lnx/0425225015>
- Social Security Administration. (2001). DI 25225.020 How We Define Marked and Extreme Limitations (Section 416.926a[e]). *Program Operations Manual System*. <https://secure.ssa.gov/poms.nsf/lnx/0425225020>
- Social Security Administration. (2023). Part III - Listing Of Impairments. *Disability Evaluation Under Social Security*. <https://www.ssa.gov/disability/professionals/bluebook/listing-impairments.htm>

Author Notes

Sonia Peterson, PhD, CRC, LPCC is Associate Faculty with National University and has a private practice in San Diego, California. She served in the California State Vocational Rehabilitation service-delivery system as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, Counselor Supervisor, and Staff Services Manager before earning her PhD in Rehabilitation and a certificate in Educational Research Methodology at the University of Arizona. She holds a MA in Rehabilitation Counseling from the University of Iowa. She is currently the Secretary of the California State Chapter of IARP and Editor-in-Chief of *The Rehabilitation Professional*.

Lisa Busby Thomas, DPC, CRC, CLCP is an Assistant Professor at Mississippi College. She also works in private practice with children and adults who have catastrophic injuries such as spinal cord injury, acquired brain injury, multiple trauma, orthopedic, burn, amputations, and other injuries, disabilities, or chronic health needs. She is a national subcontractor for the Veterans Administration throughout the U.S., and a contractor for the U.S. Department of Labor and the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs. She is currently the President for the Mississippi Chapter of IARP.