

JUDGES' BENCHBOOK OF THE BLACK LUNG BENEFITS ACT



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CHAPTER 22 Transfer of Liability to the Trust Fund

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Chapter 22

Transfer of Liability to the Trust Fund

I. Generally [III(C)(2)]

When Congress enacted the Black Lung Amendments Act of 1981, it had already determined that certain claims (approximately 20,000 in number), which were originally decided and denied by the Social Security Administration under Part 410, would be reopened for consideration by the Department of Labor under Part 727. This meant that operators were unexpectedly exposed to potential liability in cases which they thought were finally denied by the Social Security Administration.

To shield the responsible operator from this unexpected liability, § 205(a)(1) of the Black Lung Benefits Amendments Act of 1981 provided for the transfer of liability from the identified responsible operator to the Trust Fund in cases in which the claim was finally denied within the meaning of § 205(b) of the 1981 Act (*i.e.* 20 C.F.R. Part 410) before March 1, 1978 and had been or would be approved in accordance with § 435 of the Act (*i.e.* 20 C.F.R. Part 727).

II. The regulation

The regulatory provisions at 20 C.F.R. § 725.496 set forth the following criteria for transfer of liability to the Fund:

- (1) the claim must be against a responsible operator;
- (2) the claim must have been originally filed with either the SSA or the DOL before March 1, 1978;
- (3) the claim must fall within the following three classes of denied claims subject to the transfer provision, which are defined in §402(i) of the Act and § 725.496(b) of the implementing regulations:
 - (a) claims filed with and denied by the SSA prior to March 1, 1978;
 - (b) claims filed with the Department of Labor in which the claimant was notified by the Department of an administrative or informal denial before March 1, 1977, and in which the claimant did not within one year of such notification:
 - (i) request a hearing; or
 - (ii) present additional evidence; or
 - (iii) indicate an intention to present additional

evidence; or

(iv) request a modification or reconsideration of the denial on the grounds of a change in condition or mistake in fact.

(c) claims filed with the Department of Labor and denied under the law in effect prior to the enactment of the Black Lung Benefits Reform Act of 1977 (prior to March 1, 1978) following a formal hearing before an Administrative Law Judge, an administrative review before the Benefits Review Board, or before a United States Court of Appeals; and

(4) the claim must have been reconsidered under the Black Lung Benefits Reform Act of 1977 (1977 amendments/§ 435 review).

If the claim conforms with the above requirements, it falls within the 1981 Amendments and is eligible for transfer. If the claim has not yet been approved upon review under the regulations of the Black Lung Benefits Reform Act of 1977 at 20 C.F.R. Part 727, it should be handled as a premature case for the transfer of liability.

III. Determination of eligibility for transfer by the district director

Twenty C.F.R. § 725.497(b) requires that the district director review each claim to assess whether it is affected by the transfer provisions.

A. Burden of persuasion/production

The district director has a duty to present all relevant facts regarding transfer, and he or she has the initial burden on the issue of transferability. However, once the district director has determined that the claim is not subject to transfer, the employer has the burden of presenting clear evidence to the contrary to overcome such a finding. *Vance v. Peter Fork Mining Co.*, 6 B.L.R. 1-1226 (1984).

It is noteworthy that, in *USX Corp. v. Director, OWCP*, 978 F.2d 656 (11th Cir. 1992), the Eleventh Circuit held that, where a district director erroneously transfers liability from the employer to the Trust Fund, the Department of Labor's request for modification under 20 C.F.R. § 725.310 to transfer liability back to the employer is timely only if filed within one year of the employer's last payment of benefits, and not within one year of the Trust Fund's last payment.

B. Claim must be “finally denied”

In order to be eligible for transfer provisions, the claim must be “finally denied” prior to March 1, 1978. The Board has held that in informal or administrative denials under § 725.496(b)(2), a form letter sent to a claimant which informs him or her that the evidence submitted pursuant to the claim under consideration is inadequate to establish entitlement and which, setting out the standards

of proof, instructs the claimant to submit additional evidence if he or she chooses to pursue the claim, is not a “denial” for the purposes of transfer. *Edwards v. Central Coal Co.*, 7 B.L.R. 1-712 (1985). The Board has also held that the notice of review form sent to an operator is not a “denial” for the purposes of transfer. *Krysik v. Harmer Coal Co.*, 6 B.L.R. 1-1167 (1984). Likewise, a district director's failure to take any action in a case for a period of fifteen months does not constitute a *de facto* denial of the claim, whereby the Department of Labor is equitably estopped from raising the lack of a denial to defeat transfer. *Miller v. Alabama By Products Corp.*, 11 B.L.R. 1-42 (1988).

Where a claim filed with the Department of Labor prior to March 1, 1977 is subject to repeated administrative or informal denials, the last such denial issued during the pendency of the claim determines whether the claim is subject to transfer. 20 C.F.R. § 725.486(e).

C. Claim must be approved under Part 727

1. Generally

In order for claims filed with and denied by the Social Security Administration to come within the transfer provisions, such claims must have been or must be approved under the provisions of § 435 of the Act (*i.e.* 20 C.F.R. Part 727). 20 C.F.R. § 725.496(d).

In *Harman Mining Co. v. Layne*, 21 B.L.R. 2-507, Case No. 97-1385 (4th Cir. 1998) (unpub.), the court addressed the applicability of the transfer of liability provisions. It noted that the miner filed a Part B claim on June 6, 1973. He then filed a Part C claim on May 12, 1974. In June of 1975, the SSA denied the miner's Part B claim. On July 23, 1976, the DOL approved the Part C claim. The DOL argued that the transfer of liability provisions were inapplicable because both of the claims at issue were filed prior to March 1, 1978. The court agreed to state that a reasonable interpretation of the transfer provisions was that the Part C claim must be filed after March 1, 1978. The court further noted that “neither Layne's Part B claim nor his Part C claim satisfies the statutory requirements for transfer” because “[t]he Part C claim was not denied prior to March 1, 1978; the Part B claim was not approved under Section 945.”

The regulations and case law indicate that “approval” of the claim must be final, and interim approval of a claim which is ultimately denied does not qualify for transfer of liability to the Trust Fund. Initially, it is noted that the Director has the discretion to pay benefits or defend the Trust Fund against a meritless claim. Subsection 725.497(d) provides:

After it has been determined that an operator or carrier must be dismissed as a party in any claim in accordance with this section, the Director shall take such action as is authorized by the Act to bring about the proper and expeditious resolution of the claim in light of all relevant medical and other evidence. Action to be taken in this regard by the Director may include, but is not limited to, the assignment of the claim to the Black Lung Disability Trust Fund for the payment of benefits, the reimbursement of benefits previously paid by an operator or carrier *if appropriate*, the defense of the claim on behalf of the Trust Fund, or proceedings authorized by § 725.310.

(emphasis added). In *Shortt v. Director, OWCP*, 766 F.2d 172, 174 (4th Cir. 1985), the Fourth Circuit concluded that these provisions empowered the Director to “protect the Fund from meritless claims and to bring about the proper resolution of all claims” such that it was proper for him to “contest Shortt's claim, despite the initial decision of the deputy commissioner,” which was ultimately denied by the administrative law judge.

The regulatory provisions plainly provide that an employer/carrier may be reimbursed from the Trust Fund for benefits paid only under “appropriate” circumstances. Considering that one of the Director's fiscal obligations is to protect the Trust Fund from meritless claims, as concluded by the Fourth Circuit, it is incongruous to then require him to reimburse an employer/carrier for the payment of benefits on a claim which was ultimately denied.

This issue was presented before the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals in *Markus v. Old Ben Coal Co.*, 712 F.2d 322, 325-26 (7th Cir. 1983), which agreed with the Fourth Circuit. The court stated the following:

It would be most unusual for Congress to countenance the establishment of a multi-tiered claim review process if, as petitioner's reading would have it, liability automatically ensued from a positive determination at the first level (of the district director). In short, we think the plain sense of the statute, when viewed against the history of the Amendments, is that the provision creating liability when a claim 'is or has been approved' under Section 945 is simply a grandfather clause which Congress felt necessary to hold the industry Fund liable for claims, unlike the one presented here, which *had* survived the *entire* gauntlet of appeals and reviews prior to the 1981 enactments but after the 1977 Amendments.

(emphasis in original). By unpublished decision in *White v. Dana Coal Co.*, BRB No. 97-1294 BLA (July 14, 1999), the Board upheld ALJ Guill's finding that an “approved” claim for the purposes of the transfer provisions means a “finally approved claim.”

2. Filing the election card

No claim is subject to transfer unless a valid election card or other equivalent document was filed by or on behalf of the claimant, requesting review under § 435 (Part 727). Thus, for the denied Social Security Administration claim to support transfer, a valid election must have been made. *Chadwick v. Island Creek Coal Co.*, 7 B.L.R. 1-883 (1985), *aff'd on recon*, 8 B.L.R. 1-447 (1986)(en banc).

Where an election card was mailed to the claimant, but was never returned, the employer has not established an election that the claim be reviewed under Part 727 and the transfer of liability must be denied. *Krecota v. Rochester and Pittsburgh Coal Co.*, 868 F.2d 600 (3d Cir. 1978). However, an employer is entitled to transfer liability to the Trust Fund for a claimant's reopened claim where the claimant did not receive the election card.

In *Crace v. Kentland-Elkhorn Coal Corp.*, 109 F.3d 1163 (6th Cir. 1997), a claimant filed a Part B claim with the Social Security Administration which subsequently denied it. More than a

year later, a second claim was filed with the Department of Labor under Part C. After referral of the claim to the OALJ, but prior to a formal hearing, an administrative law judge dismissed the employer as a party to the claim, transferred liability to the Black Lung Disability Trust Fund (Fund), and awarded benefits. On appeal, the Board determined that the employer should have remained a party and remanded the claim for a new hearing. On remand, a second administrative law judge held a hearing with the employer as a party and issued a decision denying benefits. The claimant's appeal of the denial eventually reached the Sixth Circuit, which concluded that the claim was not suitable for transfer to the Fund because Claimant never elected review of his denied Part B claim:

The government points to computer data indicating that it sent an election card to Mr. Crace. (citation omitted). Mrs. Crace does not remember receiving such a card, however, and although she would not have seen all the mail sent to her post office box, she notes that Mr. Crace normally took care of his correspondences. Where letters have been properly sent, we presume that they have reached their destination in the usual time and have been received by the person to whom they were addressed. (citation omitted). The government's computer evidence entitles it to this presumption. Mrs. Crace's testimony that her husband normally took care of his correspondence does not adequately rebut it.

As a result, the court held that the employer was a party to the claim and, although, the first administrative law judge awarded benefits, the employer was not a party at that time and was, therefore, not bound by that decision. The court then stated that the denial of benefits by the second administrative law judge, where the employer was a party, was supported by substantial evidence in the by record.

In *Caney Creek Coal Co. v. Satterfield*, 150 F.3d 568 (6th Cir. 1998), the court held that liability for the payment of benefits did not transfer from the employer to the Black Lung Disability Trust Fund because the claimant failed to elect review of his initial claim which was filed on in June of 1973. The court noted that computer records at the Social Security Administration indicated that an election card was mailed to the miner at his correct address, which raised a rebuttable presumption that the election card was received and, by law, the miner had six months in which to submit the election card or an "equivalent document." Testimony by the miner's wife that she did not recall receiving the election card was, according to the court, insufficient to rebut the presumption. Moreover, the court held that the miner's filing of a Part C claim two months after the election card was mailed to him did not serve to support a transfer of liability. The court noted that the Department of Labor had specifically rejected such an argument in the promulgation of its regulations.

The claimant's presentation of the issue or the employer's raising of the transfer of liability issue at a formal hearing suffices as a legitimate filing of a Part B claim. *Director, OWCP v. Quarto Mining Co.*, 901 F.2d 532 (6th Cir. 1990). There are no provisions for automatic review of denied Social Security Administration claims which would support transfer. *Chadwick, supra*.

IV. Separate consideration of survivors' claims

A party responsible for the payment of survivor's benefits is not relieved of that responsibility merely because the miner's claim is subject to transfer of liability provisions. *Patton v. Earl Patton Coal Co.*, 848 F.2d 668 (6th Cir. 1988), *aff'g*, 9 B.L.R. 1-164 (1987).

V. Merger of claims to support transfer

In general, if a claimant files more than one claim for benefits and the earlier claim is still pending, the claims merge and must be considered as one claim. Merger is necessary for effective administration of cases since claims can be filed with the Social Security Administration or with the Department of Labor pursuant to § 415 of the Act, under Parts 727 and 718.

A. Merger of multiple claims under § 725.309

The procedural histories of multiple claims are to be considered separately to determine whether the transfer provisions apply, unless such claims were required to be merged by the agency's regulations. 20 C.F.R. § 725.496(c). The circumstances under which merged claims will support transfer are limited.

The regulations at 20 C.F.R. § 725.309 provide for merger of multiple claims. Section 725.309(d) states that, in the case of a claimant who files more than one claim for benefits, the later claim shall be merged with the earlier claim for all purposes if the earlier claim is still pending. A later claim cannot be merged with an earlier claim that has been finally denied where appeal rights have been waived or exhausted. The earlier claim must still be pending. *Hagerman v. Island Creek Coal Co.*, 11 B.L.R. 1-116 (1988).

! **Benefits Review Board.** In *Chadwick v. Island Creek Coal Co.*, 7 B.L.R. 1-883 (1985)(en banc), the Board set forth its analysis of the use of merger to support transfer in a case involving multiple claims. In *Chadwick*, the claimant had filed a Part B claim which was denied in June of 1975. The claimant subsequently filed a Part C claim in December of 1974, which was denied in July of 1977. Upon review, the Part C claim was approved in March of 1980.

The Board noted that the Part C claim by itself could not support transfer, since the claim was not finally denied prior to March 1, 1977, pursuant to § 725.496(b). In addition, although the Board held that the claimant must make a valid election for review of a denied Part B claim, it went on to state that, assuming a valid election had been made, upon the merger of the two claims, the procedural history of the merged claims must be viewed as merged. Therefore, had the claimant made a valid election sometime in 1978, the elected Part B claim would merge into the earlier Part C claim. Since the Part C claim was pending at the approval time, the merger of the duplicate claims would not support transfer.

! **Seventh Circuit.** In *Old Ben Coal Co. v. Luker*, 826 F.2d 688 (1987), the Seventh Circuit added some confusion to this area. With regard to the issue of whether merged claims support transfer, the court, having reviewed the regulatory and legislative history of merger,

noted that a proposed analysis consistent with the Board's analysis in *Chadwick*, that a Part C claim merges with an earlier Part C claim to defeat transfer, was rejected in the final promulgation of the regulations. The court found this to be a “persuasive basis for rejecting the Board's theory here.” *Id.* at 695. Although the Seventh Circuit rejected the *Chadwick* analysis, it remanded the case for reconsideration of whether the claimant made a valid election of a Part B claim.

In *Robertson v. Peabody Coal Co.*, 11 B.L.R. 1-120 (1988), the Board addressed the issue of transfer in a case arising in the Seventh Circuit. The administrative law judge had found “good cause” for the claimant's failure to timely elect review of the denied Part B claim and, after merging the subsequent claim under the Board's holding in *Chadwick*, concluded that liability had transferred. The Board, noting that the merger theory set forth in *Chadwick* had been rejected by the Seventh Circuit in *Luker*, nevertheless stated that since good cause was found to excuse the election of the Part B claim, the Part B claim was sufficient, by itself, to support transfer. The Board construed the subsequent approval of the claim as an approval of the Part B claim.

Note that, notwithstanding the Seventh Circuit Court's opinion in *Luker*, the Board's analysis in *Chadwick* continues to govern cases involving transfer issues in the other circuits.

B. Merger of § 410.490 and Part 727 claims and transfer

The regulations at 20 C.F.R. § 727.103 outline the § 725.309 multiple claims cases where the interim presumptions at § 727.203(a) apply. A claimant who originally filed before the Social Security Administration may elect to have his claim reviewed by either the Social Security Administration or the Department of Labor. If a claimant requests review by the Department of Labor, or if more than one claim has been filed with the Department of Labor, such claims shall be merged and processed with the first claim filed with the Department of Labor. 20 C.F.R. § 727.103(c). In *Bates v. Director, OWCP*, 7 BLR 1-113 (1984), the Board held that where the claimant elected review of a Part B claim, such claim merged with a § 415 transition claim (§ 410.490) also filed by the claimant. Likewise, the later Part C claim filed by the claimant merged with the pending § 415 claim.

A claimant who filed a claim for benefits under Part B or Part C prior to March 1, 1978, and whose previous claims are pending or have been finally denied, and the claimant files an additional claim, the later claim shall merged with any earlier claim which is subject to review under Part 727. 20 C.F.R. § 725.309(c). If the earlier claim, subject to review under Part 727, is denied, the new claim filed shall also be denied. In *Tackett v. Howell and Bailey Coal Co.*, 9 B.L.R. 1-181 (1986), the Board held that an initial claim was not finally denied since the claimant timely requested modification under § 725.310; therefore, the later claim merged with the earlier claim pursuant to § 725.309(c).

In *Lawley v. U.S. Steel Corp.*, 11 B.L.R. 1-14 (1985), the claimant filed two Part C claims. The October 1974 claim was informally denied in June of 1975. The March 1976 claim was informally denied in May of 1976, and, upon review, was later approved in August of 1977. The Board held that, although the two claims merge, liability does not transfer since the later claim was

approved in August of 1977, prior to the effective date of the Reform Act.

C. No merger of survivor's and miner's claims

Occasionally, a deceased miner's claim will be adjudicated together with the survivor's claim. If a miner dies while his claim is pending, his estate may continue his claim, and any dependent spouse or children may be entitled to benefits. A survivor of the miner may also file for benefits separately, and the claims are often adjudicated together for administrative efficiency. However, ***under no circumstances does a deceased miner's claim and a survivor's claim merge***. The claims are to be treated separately. Accordingly, in *Johnson v. Eastern Associated Coal Corp.*, 8 B.L.R. 1-248 (1985), the Board held that a deceased miner's previously denied claim cannot be combined with the subsequent approval of the widow's survivor's claim to support transfer of liability. *See also The Earl Patton Coal Co. v. Patton*, 848 F.2d 668 (6th Cir. 1988).