

Matter of Sontag

2009 NY Slip Op 32207(U)

September 2, 2009

Surrogate's Court, Nassau County

Docket Number: 339722/2009

Judge: John B. Riordan

Republished from New York State Unified Court
System's E-Courts Service.
Search E-Courts (<http://www.nycourts.gov/ecourts>) for
any additional information on this case.

This opinion is uncorrected and not selected for official
publication.

SURROGATE’S COURT OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK
COUNTY OF NASSAU

-----X

In the Matter of the Estate of

JOHN SONTAG,

Deceased.

-----X

File No. 339722

Dec. No. 693

In this accounting proceeding, the administrators seek approval of commissions and attorney’s fees. Also submitted for decision is the fee of the guardian ad litem.

The decedent John Sontag died a resident of Nassau County on January 25, 2005. Letters of administration issued to his daughter, Leesa Mayo Sontag and Veronica Greene Baker. Ms. Sontag and Ms. Baker were given permission by order dated October 10, 2007, to resign and file their final accounting. Janice Commentz was appointed administrator d.b.n. The summary statement shows charges to the accounting parties of \$294,218.00.

A guardian ad litem was appointed to represent the interests of one infant who is interested in this proceeding. She filed her report and has no objections. The guardian ad litem, however, points out that there is no one acting as guardian for her ward at this time as the current guardian is resigning and a proceeding is pending for the appointment of a successor guardian.

With respect to the issue of attorney fees, the court bears the ultimate responsibility for approving legal fees that are charged to an estate and has the discretion to determine what constitutes reasonable compensation for legal fees rendered in the course of an estate (*Matter of Stortecky v Mazzone*, 85 NY2d 518 [1995]; *Matter of Vitole*, 215 AD2d 765 [2d Dept 1995]; *Matter of Phelan*, 173 AD2d 621, 622 [2d Dept 1991]). While there is no hard and fast rule to calculate reasonable compensation to an attorney in every case, the Surrogate is required to

exercise his or her authority "with reason, proper discretion and not arbitrarily" (*Matter of Brehm*, 37 AD2d 95, 97 [4th Dept 1971]; see *Matter of Wilhelm*, 88 AD2d 6, 11-12 [4th Dept 1982]).

In evaluating the cost of legal services, the court may consider a number of factors. These include: the time spent (*Matter of Kelly*, 187 AD2d 718 [2d Dept 1992]); the complexity of the questions involved (*Matter of Coughlin*, 221 AD2d 676 [3d Dept 1995]); the nature of the services provided (*Matter of Von Hofe*, 145 AD2d 424 [2d Dept 1988]); the amount of litigation required (*Matter of Sabatino*, 66 AD2d 937 [3d Dept 1978]); the amounts involved and the benefit resulting from the execution of such services (*Matter of Shalman*, 68 AD2d 940 [3d Dept 1979]); the lawyer's experience and reputation (*Matter of Brehm*, 37 AD2d 95 [4th Dept 1971]); and the customary fee charged by the Bar for similar services (*Matter of Potts*, 123 Misc 346 [Sur Ct, Columbia County 1924], *affd* 213 App Div 59 [4th Dept 1925], *affd* 241 NY 593 [1925]; *Matter of Freeman*, 34 NY2d 1 [1974]). In discharging this duty to review fees, the court cannot apply a selected few factors which might be more favorable to one position or another but must strike a balance by considering all of the elements set forth in *Matter of Potts* (123 Misc 346 [Sur Ct, Columbia County 1924], *affd* 213 App Div 59 [4th Dept 1925], *affd* 241 NY 593 [1925]), and as re-enunciated in *Matter of Freeman* (34 NY2d 1 [1974]) (see *Matter of Berkman*, 93 Misc 2d 423 [Sur Ct, Bronx County 1978]). Also, the legal fee must bear a reasonable relationship to the size of the estate (*Matter of Kaufmann*, 26 AD2d 818 [1st Dept 1966], *affd* 23 NY2d 700 [1968]; *Martin v Phipps*, 21 AD2d 646 [1st Dept 1964], *affd* 16 NY2d 594 [1965]). A sizeable estate permits adequate compensation, but nothing beyond that (*Martin v Phipps*, 21 AD2d 646 [1st Dept 1964], *affd* 16 NY2d 594 [1965]; *Matter of Reede*, NYLJ, Oct.

28, 1991, at 37, col 2 [Sur Ct, Nassau County]; *Matter of Yancey*, NYLJ, Feb. 18, 1993, at 28, col 1 [Sur Ct, Westchester County]). Moreover, the size of the estate can operate as a limitation on the fees payable (*Matter of McCranor*, 176 AD2d 1026 [3d Dept 1991]; *Matter of Kaufmann*, 26 AD2d 818 [1st Dept 1966], *affd* 23 NY2d 700 [1968]), without constituting an adverse reflection on the services provided.

The burden with respect to establishing the reasonable value of legal services performed rests on the attorney performing those services (*Matter of Potts*, 123 Misc 346 [Sur Ct, Columbia County 1924], *affd* 213 App Div 59 [4th Dept 1925], *affd* 241 NY 593 [1925]; *see e.g. Matter of Spatt*, 32 NY2d 778 [1973]). Contemporaneous records of legal time spent on estate matters are important to the court in determining whether the amount of time spent was reasonable for the various tasks performed (*Matter of Von Hofe*, 145 AD2d 424 [2d Dept 1988]; *Matter of Phelan*, 173 AD2d 621 [2d Dept 1991]).

These factors apply equally to an attorney retained by a fiduciary or to a court-appointed guardian ad litem (*Matter of Burk*, 6 AD2d 429 [1st Dept 1958]; *Matter of Berkman*, 93 Misc 2d 423 [Sur Ct, Bronx County 1978]; *Matter of Reisman*, NYLJ, May 18, 2000, at 34 [Sur Ct, Nassau County]). Moreover, the nature of the role played by the guardian ad litem is an additional consideration in determining his or her fee (*Matter of Ziegler*, 184 AD2d 201 [1st Dept 1992]).

With respect to disbursements, the tradition in Surrogate's Court practice is that the attorney may not be reimbursed for expenses that the court normally considers to be part of overhead, such as photocopying, postage, telephone calls, and other items of the same matter (*Matter of Graham*, 238 AD2d 682 [3d Dept 1997]; *Matter of Diamond*, 219 AD2d 717 [2d Dept

1995]; Warren's Heaton on Surrogate's Court Practice §106.02 [2][a][7th ed.]). In *Matter of Corwith* (NYLJ, May 3, 1995, at 35 [Sur Ct, Nassau County]), this court discussed the allowance of charges for photocopies, telephone calls, postage, messengers and couriers, express deliveries and computer-assisted legal research. The court concluded that it would permit reimbursement for such disbursements only if they involved payment to an outside supplier of goods and services, adopting the standards set forth in *Matter of Herlinger* (NYLJ, Apr. 28, 1994, at 28 [Sur Ct, New York County]). The court prohibited reimbursement for ordinary postage and telephone charges other than long distance.

In this case, the attorney has supplied the court with an affidavit of legal services and it shows that the attorney rendered more than 75 hours of legal services. The attorney is requesting a total fee of \$16,075.00 The affidavit details a wide range of legal services provided to the estate. A brief summary shows that the services performed were preparation of the documents incidental to the administration proceeding, negotiating with Nassau County Department of Social Services regarding the reinstatement of the decedent's medicaid and his bills from his final illness paid, selling the decedent's real property, meeting with representatives of the decedent's spouse who is incapacitated and for whom a supplemental needs trust has been established, preparing the accounting petition, and preparing papers for the resignation of Ms. Sontag and Ms. Baker and the appointment of Ms. Commentz

Based on a review of the affidavit, the time records, the size of the estate and all of the aforementioned, the court approves the total attorney's fees in the amount requested.

The guardian ad litem has submitted an affidavit of services in which she advises the court that she has rendered 13.7 hours of legal services on this matter consisting of reviewing the

account, determining if the expenses of the estate were reasonable and determining if the distribution to her ward was fair and reasonable. Considering all of the factors used to determine the reasonableness of fees set forth herein, the court fixes the fee of the guardian ad litem for services rendered in the amount of \$3,500.00. The guardian ad litem fee shall be paid within thirty (30) days of the date the decree to be entered herein.

Finally, the commissions are approved subject to audit.

Settle decree.

Dated: September 2, 2009

JOHN B. RIORDAN
Judge of the
Surrogate's Court