United States Department of Labor
Employees' Compensation Appeals Board

T.S., Appellant	)	
and	)	**Docket No. 26-0495**
	)	**Issued: September 3, 2026**
U.S. POSTAL SERVICE, PORTLAND MAINE SORTING & DELIVERY CENTER POST OFFICE, Portland, ME, Employer	)	

Appearances:
Appellant, pro se
Office of Solicitor, for the Director

Case Submitted on the Record

DECISION AND ORDER

Before:
PATRICIA H. FITZGERALD, Deputy Chief Judge
JANICE B. ASKIN, Judge
VALERIE D. EVANS-HARRELL, Alternate Judge

JURISDICTION

On May 6, 2026 appellant filed a timely appeal from a February 4, 2026 merit decision of the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP). Pursuant to the Federal Employees' Compensation Act[1] (FECA) and 20 C.F.R. §§ 501.2(c) and 501.3, the Board has jurisdiction over the merits of this case.

ISSUE

The issue is whether appellant has met her burden of proof to establish a left knee condition causally related to the accepted August 16, 2025 employment incident.

FACTUAL HISTORY

On October 9, 2025 appellant, then a 54-year-old rural carrier associate, filed a traumatic injury claim (Form CA-1) alleging that, on August 16, 2025, she sustained a sprained

[1] 5 U.S.C. § 8101 *et seq.*

muscle/ligament in her left knee when she twisted her knee as she exited her long-life vehicle (LLV) while in the performance of duty. She stopped work on August 16, 2025, and returned to full-time, regular-duty work on November 13, 2025.

In an October 14, 2025 letter, the employing establishment controverted appellant's claim.

In support of her claim, appellant submitted an official position description for a rural carrier associate and an after-visit summary dated August 18, 2025 documenting treatment for acute left knee pain with Anthony Caiazzo, a nurse practitioner.

In an October 20, 2025 development letter, OWCP informed appellant of the deficiencies of her claim. It advised her of the type of medical evidence required to establish her claim. OWCP afforded appellant 60 days to submit the requested evidence.

Thereafter, OWCP received additional evidence. In an August 18, 2025 progress note, Mr. Caiazzo evaluated appellant for left knee pain, discussed examination findings, and diagnosed left knee pain with underlying osteoarthritis and possible mild sprain.

In an August 18, 2025 report, Dr. Jennifer M. Riehl, a Board-certified internist, documented appellant's complaints of acute left knee pain and noted a history of arthritis. She reported that appellant twisted her left knee while exiting a vehicle with a high step on August 16, 2025, which resulted in an immediate limp. Dr. Riehl diagnosed left knee pain post-twisting injury with underlying osteoarthritis and a possible mild sprain. She explained that the condition was likely an exacerbation of appellant's osteoarthritis with a possible mild sprain and indicated that no major tears were suspected. Dr. Riehl restricted appellant to light-duty work and ordered diagnostic testing of the left knee.

In a follow-up letter dated January 9, 2026, OWCP advised appellant that it conducted an interim review, and the evidence remained insufficient to establish her claim. It noted that she had 60 days from the October 20, 2025 letter to submit the necessary evidence. OWCP further advised that if the evidence was not received during this time, it would issue a decision based on the evidence contained in the record. No additional evidence was received.

By decision dated February 4, 2026, OWCP denied appellant's claim, finding that the evidence of record was insufficient to establish a left knee condition causally related to the accepted August 16, 2025 employment incident.

LEGAL PRECEDENT

An employee seeking benefits under FECA[2] has the burden of proof to establish the essential elements of his or her claim, including that the individual is an employee of the United States within the meaning of FECA, that the claim was timely filed within the applicable time limitation of FECA,[3] that an injury was sustained in the performance of duty as alleged, and that

[2] *Id*.

[3] *E.K.*, Docket No. 22-1130 (issued December 30, 2022); *F.H.*, Docket No. 18-0869 (issued January 29, 2020); *J.P.*, Docket No. 19-0129 (issued April 26, 2019); *Joe D. Cameron*, 41 ECAB 153 (1989).

any disability or medical condition for which compensation is claimed is causally related to the employment injury.[4] These are the essential elements of each and every compensation claim, regardless of whether the claim is predicated upon a traumatic injury or an occupational disease.[5]

To determine whether a federal employee has sustained a traumatic injury in the performance of duty, it first must be determined whether fact of injury has been established. First, the employee must submit sufficient evidence to establish that he or she actually experienced the employment incident at the time and place, and in the manner alleged. Second, the employee must submit sufficient evidence to establish that the employment incident caused an injury.[6]

The medical evidence required to establish causal relationship between a claimed specific condition and an employment incident is rationalized medical opinion evidence.[7] The opinion of the physician must be based on a complete factual and medical background of the employee, must be one of reasonable medical certainty, and must be supported by medical rationale explaining the nature of the relationship between the diagnosed condition and specific employment incident identified by the employee.[8]

ANALYSIS

The Board finds that appellant has not met her burden of proof to establish a left knee condition causally related to the accepted August 16, 2025 employment incident.

In an August 18, 2025 report, Dr. Riehl documented appellant's complaints of acute left knee pain, noted a history of arthritis, and related that appellant twisted her left knee while exiting a vehicle with a high step on August 16, 2025. She diagnosed left knee pain post-twisting injury with underlying osteoarthritis and a possible mild sprain. Dr. Riehl explained that the condition was likely an exacerbation of appellant's osteoarthritis with a possible mild sprain and indicated that no major tears were suspected. While Dr. Riehl accurately noted the history of injury provided by appellant, she did not offer an opinion regarding the cause of appellant's condition.[9] The Board has held that medical evidence that does not offer an opinion regarding the cause of an employee's

[4] *S.H.*, Docket No. 22-0391 (issued June 29, 2022); *L.C.*, Docket No. 19-1301 (issued January 29, 2020); *J.H.*, Docket No. 18-1637 (issued January 29, 2020); *James E. Chadden*, *Sr.*, 40 ECAB 312 (1988).

[5] *E.H.*, Docket No. 22-0401 (issued June 29, 2022); *P.A.*, Docket No. 18-0559 (issued January 29, 2020); *K.M.,* Docket No. 15-1660 (issued September 16, 2016); *Delores C. Ellyett*, 41 ECAB 992 (1990).

[6] *H.M.*, Docket No. 22-0343 (issued June 28, 2022); *T.J.*, Docket No. 19-0461 (issued August 11, 2020); *K.L.*, Docket No. 18-1029 (issued January 9, 2019); *John J. Carlone*, 41 ECAB 354 (1989).

[7] *S.M.*, Docket No. 22-0075 (issued May 6, 2022); *S.S.*, Docket No. 19-0688 (issued January 24, 2020); *A.M.*, Docket No. 18-1748 (issued April 24, 2019); *Robert G. Morris*, 48 ECAB 238 (1996).

[8] *J.D.*, Docket No. 22-0935 (issued December 16, 2022); *T.L.*, Docket No. 18-0778 (issued January 22, 2020); *Y.S.*, Docket No. 18-0366 (issued January 22, 2020); *Victor J. Woodhams*, 41 ECAB 345, 352 (1989).

[9] *M.H.*, Docket No. 25-0864 (issued January 5, 2026); *S.S.*, Docket No. 18-0081 (issued August 22, 2018).

condition or disability is of no probative value on the issue of causal relationship.[10] Therefore, this evidence is insufficient to establish appellant's claim.

In support of her claim, appellant also submitted evidence from Mr. Caiazzo, a nurse practitioner. However, certain health care providers such as nurses, physician assistants, and physical therapists are not considered physicians under FECA and, therefore, are not competent to provide a medical opinion.[11] Consequently, their medical findings and/or opinions will not suffice for the purpose of establishing entitlement to FECA benefits.[12] As such, this evidence is of no probative value and insufficient to establish appellant's claim.

As the medical evidence of record is insufficient to establish a left knee condition causally related to the accepted August 16, 2025 employment incident, the Board finds that appellant has not met her burden of proof.[13]

Appellant may submit new evidence or argument with a written request for reconsideration to OWCP within one year of this merit decision, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 8128(a) and 20 C.F.R. §§ 10.605 through 10.607.

CONCLUSION

The Board finds that appellant has not met her burden of proof to establish a left knee condition causally related to the accepted August 16, 2025 employment incident.

[10] *See R.N.,* Docket No. 26-0291 (issued June 18, 2026); *L.B.,* Docket No. 18-0533 (issued August 27, 2018); *D.K.,* Docket No. 17-1549 (issued July 6, 2018).

[11] Section 8101(2) provides that physician includes surgeons, podiatrists, dentists, clinical psychologists, optometrists, chiropractors, and osteopathic practitioners within the scope of their practice as defined by State law, 5 U.S.C. § 8101(2); 20 C.F.R. § 10.5(t). *See* Federal (FECA) Procedure Manual, Part 2 -- Claims, *Causal Relationship*, Chapter 2.805.3a(1) (May 2023); *David P. Sawchuk,* 57 ECAB 316, 320 n.11 (2006) (lay individuals such as physician assistants, nurses, and physical therapists are not competent to render a medical opinion under FECA). *See also N.H.,* Docket No. 26-0136 (issued March 18, 2026) (nurse practitioners are not physicians under FECA).

[12] *Id.*; *D.O.*, Docket No. 25-0722 (issued January 5, 2026); *N.B.*, Docket No. 19-0221 (issued July 15, 2019).

[13] *I.D.*, Docket No. 22-0848 (issued September 2, 2022); *T.G.*, Docket No. 14-751 (issued October 20, 2014).

ORDER

IT IS HEREBY ORDERED THAT the February 4, 2026 decision of the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs is affirmed.

Issued: September 3, 2026
Washington, DC

Patricia H. Fitzgerald, Deputy Chief Judge
Employees' Compensation Appeals Board

Janice B. Askin, Judge
Employees' Compensation Appeals Board

Valerie D. Evans-Harrell, Alternate Judge
Employees' Compensation Appeals Board