



January 25, 2000

Mr. Leonard W. Peck Jr.
Assistant General Counsel
Texas Department of Criminal Justice
P.O. Box 4004
Huntsville, Texas 77342

OR2000-0244

Dear Mr. Peck:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 130957.

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice ("TDCJ") received a request for a list of names and numbers of TDCJ prisoners incarcerated at the Estelle High Security Unit. The requestor states that this list is similar to the list of Ellis Unit prisoner names and numbers that TDCJ produces upon request and publishes on its website. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.107 and 552.131 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Section 552.301 of the Government Code provides that a governmental body must ask the attorney general for a decision as to whether requested documents must be disclosed not later than the tenth business day after the date of receiving the written request. TDCJ received the requestor's written request for information on July 14, 1999. You did not request a decision from this office until November 2, 1999, more than ten business days after the requestor's written request. Therefore, we conclude that TDCJ failed to meet its ten-day deadline for requesting a decision from this office.

When a governmental body fails to request a decision within ten business days of receiving a request for information, the information at issue is presumed public and must be released

unless there is a compelling reason to withhold it. Gov't Code § 552.302; *Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379 (Tex. App.--Austin 1990, no writ); *City of Houston v. Houston Chronicle Publ'g Co.*, 673 S.W.2d 316, 323 (Tex. App.--Houston [1st Dist.] 1984, no writ); Open Records Decision No. 319 (1982). The governmental body must show a compelling interest to withhold the information to overcome this presumption. *See id.* Normally, a compelling interest is that some other source of law makes the information confidential or that third party interests are at stake. Open Records Decision No. 150 at 2 (1977). Here, the applicability of sections 552.107(2) and 552.131 may present compelling reasons to overcome the presumption of openness.

Section 552.131(a) relating to TDCJ inmates states:

Except as provided by Subsection (b) or by Section 552.029, information obtained or maintained by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice is excepted from the requirements of Section 552.021 if it is information about an inmate who is confined in a facility operated by or under a contract with the department.

Section 552.029 states in pertinent part:

Notwithstanding . . . Section 552.131, the following information about an inmate who is confined in a facility operated by or under a contract with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice is subject to required disclosure under Section 552.021:

- (1) the inmate's name, identification number, age, birthplace, physical description, or general state of health or the nature of an injury to or critical illness suffered by the inmate;
- (2) the inmate's assigned unit or the date on which the unit received the inmate, unless disclosure of the information would violate federal law relating to the confidentiality of substance abuse treatment[.]

You argue that the term "assigned unit" under section 552.029(2) only refers to the main penal facility itself and not to the "units" within the main penal facility such as the Estelle High Security unit. You, therefore, conclude that the requested information is excepted from release under section 552.131. However, this office believes that section 552.029(2) does not contemplate a distinction between the main penal facility and the "units" within the main penal facility in referring to the inmate's "assigned unit." Therefore, as section 552.131 is

explicitly made subject to section 552.029, you must release the requested information pursuant to section 552.029.¹

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

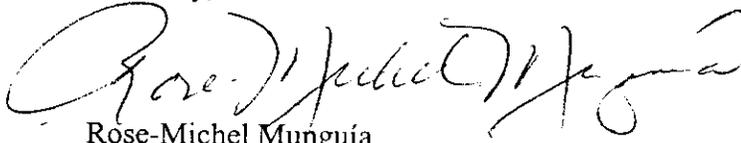
If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at 877/673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Department of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ).

¹ This ruling is limited to the application of sections 552.029 and 552.131. This ruling does not consider the applicability and effect of the Final Judgment in the case of *Ruiz v. Collins*, No. H-78-987 (S.D. Tex., filed Dec. 11, 1992), to the information at issue. However, we note that *Ruiz* is still in effect and it prohibits the release of certain "sensitive information," which may include information required to be released under section 552.029. We remind you that section 552.107(2) of the Government Code requires you to withhold information that is made confidential by court order, and that section 552.352 prescribes criminal penalties for the disclosure of confidential information.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rose-Michel Munguía". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and "M".

Rose-Michel Munguía
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

RMM/jc

Ref: ID# 130957

Encl. Submitted documents

cc: Ms. Yolanda Torres
ACLU-Northern Region
P.O. Box 710356
Dallas, Texas 75371
(w/o enclosures)