



OFFICE *of the* ATTORNEY GENERAL  
GREG ABBOTT

March 31, 2003

Mr. James L. Hall  
Assistant General Counsel  
Texas Department of Criminal Justice  
P.O. Box 4004  
Huntsville, Texas 77342

OR2003-2164

Dear Mr. Hall:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 178561.

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (the "department") received a written request for all records pertaining to the department's investigation of an allegation of sexual harassment. The request is from the victim of the alleged harassment. You contend that portions of the documents coming within the scope of the request are excepted from required disclosure pursuant to sections 552.101 and 552.117 of the Government Code.

Initially, we note that the submitted information is expressly made subject to section 552.022 of the Government Code. This section provides several categories of information that are not excepted from required disclosure unless they "are expressly confidential under other law." In pertinent part, this section provides as follows:

(a) Without limiting the amount or kind of information that is public information under this chapter, the following categories of information are public information and not excepted from required disclosure under this chapter unless they are expressly confidential under other law:

(1) a completed report, audit, evaluation, or investigation made of, for, or by a governmental body, except as provided by Section 552.108[.]

Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(1). The submitted information consists of records from a completed investigation, which are expressly public under section 552.022(a)(1). Therefore,

the department may only withhold this information if the information is confidential under other law or the information comes within the protection of section 552.108 of the Government Code.<sup>1</sup> Because you contend that portions of the information at issue are confidential for purposes of sections 552.101 and 552.117(3) of the Government Code, we will consider your claims.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision," including information that is encompassed by the common-law right to privacy. *See Industrial Found. v. Texas Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668 (Tex. 1976), *cert. denied*, 430 U.S. 931 (1977). Section 552.101 encompasses information that is protected from disclosure by the common-law right to privacy. Information is protected from disclosure under the common-law right to privacy if (1) it contains highly intimate or embarrassing facts the release of which would be highly objectionable to a reasonable person, and (2) it is not of legitimate concern to the public. *See id.* at 685

In *Morales v. Ellen*, 840 S.W.2d 519 (Tex. App.—El Paso 1992, writ denied), the court applied the common-law right to privacy addressed in *Industrial Foundation* to an investigation of allegations of sexual harassment. The investigation files at issue in *Ellen* contained third-party witness statements, an affidavit in which the individual accused of the misconduct responded to the allegations, and the conclusions of the board of inquiry that conducted the investigation. *See* 840 S.W.2d at 525. The court upheld the release of the affidavit of the person under investigation and the conclusions of the board of inquiry, stating that the disclosure of such documents sufficiently served the public's interest in the matter. *Id.* The court further held, however, that "the public does not possess a legitimate interest in the identities of the individual witnesses, nor the details of their personal statements beyond what is contained in the documents that have been ordered released." *Id.* Therefore, when there is an adequate summary of an investigation, the summary and any statements of the person under investigation must be released, but the identities of the victims and witnesses must be redacted and their detailed statements must be withheld from disclosure. However, when no adequate summary exists, detailed statements regarding the allegations must be released, but the identities of witnesses and victims must still be redacted from the statements.

In accordance with *Ellen*, this office typically has required the release of a document analogous to the conclusions of the board of inquiry in *Ellen*, but has held that a governmental body must withhold both the identities of victims and witnesses of alleged sexual harassment and any information that would tend to identify such a victim or witness. In this instance, the submitted information consists of statements by the victim of the alleged sexual harassment, statements of witnesses, the statement of the accused, a summary of the

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<sup>1</sup>We note that you have not raised section 552.108 in this instance.

department's investigation, and other supporting documents. Upon careful review of the submitted information, we believe that the department's "Fact Finding Memorandum," dated September 14, 2002, is analogous to the conclusions of the board of inquiry, the release of which was upheld in *Ellen*. Accordingly, we conclude that the department must release its "Fact Finding Memorandum" and the statement of the accused to the requestor. In doing so, however, the department must withhold the identities of the witnesses, other than the accused, and information that would tend to identify the witnesses. *See Ellen*, 840 S.W.2d at 525. However, because the requestor is also the victim of the alleged harassment, the requestor has a special right of access, beyond that of the general public, to the requestor's identifying information in these two documents. *See Gov't Code* § 552.023(a). We have marked the information that the department must withhold in these documents pursuant to section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with *Ellen*. The department must also withhold the remaining submitted information pursuant to *Ellen*.

You contend that portions of the remaining submitted information are excepted from required public disclosure under section 552.117(3) of the Government Code. Section 552.117(3) requires the department to withhold "information that relates to the home address, home telephone number, or social security number, or that reveals whether" a department employee "has family members." Accordingly, the department must withhold these categories of information within the "Fact Finding Memorandum" and the statement of the accused pursuant to section 552.117(3). We have marked the documents accordingly.

In summary, we have marked the information in the "Fact Finding Memorandum" and the statement of the accused that the department must withhold pursuant to sections 552.101 and 552.117(3). The remaining information in these two documents must be released to the requestor. However, the remaining submitted documents are confidential under section 552.101 in accordance with *Ellen* and must not be released to the requestor.

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 Dep't of Pub. Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the Texas Building and Procurement Commission at (512) 475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. We note that a third party may challenge this ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. 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,



Ronald J. Bounds  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

RJB/RWP/seg

Ref: ID# 178561

Enc: Submitted documents