



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

October 27, 2003

Ms. Julie Joe
Assistant County Attorney
Travis County Attorney's Office
P.O. Box 1748
Austin, Texas 78767

OR2003-7673

Dear Ms. Joe:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 190028.

The Travis County Attorney's Office (the "county attorney") received a request for a copy of the county attorney's file in a specified criminal cause. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.108 and 552.111 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and have reviewed the information you submitted.

We first note that chapter 552 of the Government Code does not require a governmental body to release information that did not exist when it received a request for information.¹ In this instance, one of the submitted documents appears to have been created after the date of the county attorney's receipt of this request. Thus, that document is not responsive to the request. This decision is not applicable to the non-responsive document, which we have marked accordingly.

We also note that the submitted documents include an arrest warrant and the supporting affidavit for the warrant. The 78th Legislature recently amended article 15.26 of the Code of Criminal Procedure to add language providing:

¹See *Economic Opportunities Dev. Corp. v. Bustamante*, 562 S.W.2d 266 (Tex. Civ. App.—San Antonio 1978, writ dismissed); Open Records Decision Nos. 452 at 3 (1986), 362 at 2 (1983).

The arrest warrant, and any affidavit presented to the magistrate in support of the issuance of the warrant, *is public information*, and beginning immediately when the warrant is executed the magistrate's clerk *shall make a copy of the warrant and the affidavit available for public inspection* in the clerk's office during normal business hours. A person may request the clerk to provide copies of the warrant and affidavit on payment of the cost of providing the copies.

Act of May 31, 2003, 78th Leg., R.S., ch. 390, § 1, Tex. Sess. Laws Serv. 1631 (to be codified as amendment to Crim. Proc. Code art. 15.26) (emphasis added). Thus, the submitted arrest warrant and the affidavit for the warrant are made public and must be released under article 15.26 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. As a general rule, the exceptions to disclosure found in chapter 552 of the Government Code do not apply to information that is made public by other statutes. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 623 at 3 (1994), 525 at 3 (1989). Therefore, the arrest warrant and affidavit that we have marked must be released to the requestor under article 15.26 of the Code of Criminal Procedure.

The submitted information also includes a document that is made confidential under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with the Medical Practice Act (the "MPA"), subtitle B of title 3 of the Occupations Code.² *See* Occ. Code § 151.001. The MPA governs the disclosure of medical records. Section 159.002 of the MPA provides in part:

- (a) A communication between a physician and a patient, relative to or in connection with any professional services as a physician to the patient, is confidential and privileged and may not be disclosed except as provided by this chapter.
- (b) A record of the identity, diagnosis, evaluation, or treatment of a patient by a physician that is created or maintained by a physician is confidential and privileged and may not be disclosed except as provided by this chapter.
- (c) A person who receives information from a confidential communication or record as described by this chapter, other than a person listed in Section 159.004 who is acting on the patient's behalf, may not disclose the information except to the extent that disclosure is consistent with the authorized purposes for which the information was first obtained.

²Section 552.101 excepts from required public disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." This exception encompasses information that another statute makes confidential.

Id. § 159.002(a)-(c). This office has determined that in governing access to a specific subset of information, the MPA prevails over the more general provisions of chapter 552 of the Government Code. *See* Open Records Decision No. 598 (1991). In this instance, the requestor identifies himself as an attorney for the individual who is the subject of the submitted medical record. Therefore, the requestor may have a right of access to the medical record under the MPA. A medical record must be released upon the patient's signed, written consent, provided that the consent specifies (1) the information to be covered by the release, (2) reasons or purposes for the release, and (3) the person to whom the information is to be released. *See* Occ. Code §§ 159.004, .005. Any subsequent release of a medical record must be consistent with the purposes for which the governmental body obtained the records. *See id.* § 159.002(c); Open Records Decision No. 565 at 7 (1990). We have marked the submitted document that is subject to the MPA. That document may only be released as permitted by the MPA. *See* Open Records Decision No. 598 (1991).

The county attorney seeks to withhold the rest of the requested information under section 552.108 of the Government Code. This section provides in part:

(a) Information held by a law enforcement agency or prosecutor that deals with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of crime is excepted from [required public disclosure] if:

...

(4) it is information that:

(A) is prepared by an attorney representing the state in anticipation of or in the course of preparing for criminal litigation; or

(B) represents the mental impressions or legal reasoning of an attorney representing the state.

(b) An internal record or notation of a law enforcement agency or prosecutor that is maintained for internal use in matters relating to law enforcement or prosecution is excepted from [required public disclosure] if:

...

(3) the internal record or notation:

(A) is prepared by an attorney representing the state in anticipation of or in the course of preparing for criminal litigation; or

(B) represents the mental impressions or legal reasoning of an attorney representing the state.

Gov't Code § 552.108(a)(4), (b)(3). A governmental body that claims an exception to disclosure under section 552.108 must reasonably explain how and why this exception is applicable to the information that the governmental body seeks to withhold. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(e)(1)(A); *Ex parte Pruitt*, 551 S.W.2d 706 (Tex. 1977); Open Records Decision No. 434 at 2-3 (1986).

In *Curry v. Walker*, 873 S.W.2d 379 (Tex. 1994), the Texas Supreme Court held that a request for a district attorney's "entire litigation file" was "too broad" and, quoting *National Union Fire Insurance Co. v. Valdez*, 863 S.W.2d 458 (Tex. 1993, orig. proceeding), held that "the decision as to what to include in [the file] necessarily reveals the attorney's thought processes concerning the prosecution or defense of the case." *Curry*, 873 S.W.2d at 380. In this instance, the requestor seeks access to "a copy of the County Attorney's file." You inform us that your office interprets this request for information as a request for the county attorney's entire prosecution file in the cause that the requestor specifies. You assert that the release of the rest of this information would reveal the mental impressions or legal reasoning of prosecutors in your office. Based on your representations, we agree that section 552.108(a)(4) and (b)(3) of the Government Code are applicable to the rest of the requested information.

We note that section 552.108 does not except from disclosure "basic information about an arrested person, an arrest, or a crime." Gov't Code § 552.108(c). Section 552.108(c) refers to the basic front-page information held to be public in *Houston Chronicle Publishing Co. v. City of Houston*, 531 S.W.2d 177 (Tex. Civ. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1975), *writ ref'd n.r.e. per curiam*, 536 S.W.2d 559 (Tex. 1976). The county attorney must release basic front-page information under section 552.108(c), including a detailed description of the offense, even if that information does not literally appear on the front page of an offense or arrest report. *See Houston Chronicle*, 531 S.W.2d at 186-187; Open Records Decision No. 127 at 3-4 (1976) (summarizing types of information deemed public by *Houston Chronicle*). The county attorney may withhold the rest of the requested information, except for the arrest warrant, the affidavit for the warrant, and the medical record, under section 552.108(a)(4) and (b)(3).

In summary, the county attorney must release the arrest warrant and the affidavit for the warrant under article 15.26 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. The medical record may only be released as permitted by the MPA. The county attorney may withhold the rest of the

requested information under section 552.108(a)(4) and (b)(3) of the Government Code, except for the basic information that must be released under section 552.108(c). As we are able to make these determinations, we need not address your other arguments against disclosure.

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).

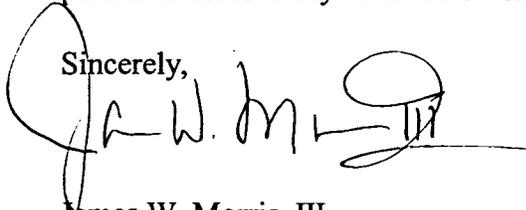
If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J.W. Morris, III". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

James W. Morris, III
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JWM/sdk

Ref: ID# 190028

Enc: Submitted documents

c: Mr. Adam S. Ward
Allison & Ward
2001 North Lamar
Austin, Texas 78705
(w/o enclosures)