



OFFICE of the ATTORNEY GENERAL
GREG ABBOTT

February 27, 2004

Mr. Monty Waters
Assistant General Counsel
Texas Department of Health
1100 West 49th Street
Austin, Texas 78756-3199

OR2004-1453

Dear Mr. Waters:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under the Public Information Act (the "Act"), chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 196939.

The Texas Department of Health (the "department") received a request for information "concerning the yellow fever death of [a named individual]." You state that some responsive information "has been or will be released to the requestor." You claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Initially, we note, and you acknowledge, that the department has not sought an open records decision from this office within ten business days, as prescribed by section 552.301 of the Government Code. When a governmental body fails to comply with the procedural requirements of section 552.301, the information at issue is presumed public. *See* Gov't Code § 552.302; *Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379, 381 (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). To overcome this presumption, the governmental body must show a compelling interest to withhold the information. *See* Gov't Code § 552.302; *Hancock*, 797 S.W.2d at 381. 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). As the presumption of openness can be overcome by a showing that information is

confidential by law, we will consider your arguments under section 552.101 in conjunction with section 81.046 of the Health and Safety Code.

Section 552.101 excepts from disclosure “information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision.” This section encompasses information protected by other statutes. You contend that the submitted information is excepted in its entirety under section 81.046 of the Health and Safety Code.¹ Section 81.046 provides in part:

(a) Reports, records, and information furnished to a health authority or the [Texas Department of Health] that relate to cases or suspected cases of diseases or health conditions are confidential and may be used only for the purposes of this chapter.

(b) Reports, records, and information relating to cases or suspected cases of diseases or health conditions are not public information under Chapter 552, Government Code, and may not be released or made public on subpoena or otherwise except as provided by Subsection (c) and (d).

Health & Safety Code § 81.046(a)-(b). In Open Records Decision No. 577 (1990), this office concluded that any information acquired or created during an investigation under chapter 81 of the Health and Safety Code is confidential and may not be released unless an exception set out in the statute applies.

You state that the information at issue was “either furnished to [the department] or [was] created/gathered by [the department].” You further assert that the submitted information pertains to “cases or suspected cases of diseases or health conditions.” You also state that none of the release provisions of section 81.046 is applicable in this instance. Based on your representations and our review of the submitted information, we determine that the department must withhold the submitted information under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 81.046 of the Health and Safety Code.

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

¹Section 81.046 is part of the Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Act, chapter 81 of the Health and Safety Code. See Health & Safety Code § 81.001.

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,



Cindy Nettles
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

CN/jh

Ref: ID# 196939

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Ms. Michelle D. Shircliffe
Hartline, Dacus, Barger, Dreyer & Kern, L.L.P.
800 North Shoreline Boulevard, Suite 2000, North Tower
Corpus Christi, Texas 78401
(w/o enclosures)