ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

June 29, 2004

Ms. Alice Caruso
Assistant Disclosure Officer
Information Release
Texas Workforce Commission
101 East 15th Street
Austin, Texas 78778-0001

OR2004-5293

Dear Ms. Caruso:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 206926.

The Texas Workforce Commission (the "commission") received a request for a copy of the unemployment claim file of a specific individual. You state that, with the exception of the submitted documents, all of the requested information will be released. You claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101 and 552.107 of the Government Code. We have considered your claimed exceptions to disclosure and reviewed the submitted information.

Initially, we must address the commission's obligations under section 552.301 of the Government Code. Section 552.301 describes the procedural obligations placed on a governmental body that receives a written request for information that it wishes to withhold. Pursuant to section 552.301(b), the governmental body must ask for the attorney general's decision and state the exceptions that apply within ten business days after receiving the request. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(a), (b). Under section 552.301(e), a governmental body receiving an open records request for information that it wishes to withhold pursuant to one of the exceptions to public disclosure is required to submit to this office within fifteen business days of receiving the request (1) general written comments stating the reasons why the stated exceptions apply that would allow the information to be withheld, (2) a copy of the written request for information, (3) a signed statement or sufficient evidence showing the

date the governmental body received the written request, and (4) a copy of the specific information requested or representative samples, labeled to indicate which exceptions apply to which parts of the documents. In this case, we find that the commission failed to comply with the procedural requirements mandated by section 552.301(b) and (e).

Pursuant to section 552.302 of the Government Code, a governmental body's failure to comply with the procedural requirements of section 552.301 results in the legal presumption that the requested information is public and must be released. In order to overcome the presumption that the requested information is public, a governmental body must provide compelling reasons why the information should not be disclosed. *Hancock*, 797 S.W.2d at 381; *see also* Open Records Decision No. 150 (1977) (concluding that compelling reason exists when requested information is confidential by law or third party interests are at stake). Section 552.107 is a discretionary exception that generally does not provide a compelling reason to withhold information from disclosure. *See* Open Records Decision No. 630 at 4 (1994) (governmental body may waive attorney-client privilege under Gov't Code § 552.107(1)); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 522 at 4 (1989) (discretionary exceptions in general). *But see* Open Records Decision No. 676 at 11 (2002) (compelling reason under Gov't Code § 552.302 may be demonstrated for attorney-client privileged communications if it is shown that release of information would harm third party). On the other hand, the applicability of section 552.101 does provide a compelling reason to overcome the presumption of openness. We will, therefore, address the commission's arguments under section 552.101.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." Gov't Code § 552.101. This section encompasses information made confidential by other statutes. You claim that the submitted information is confidential under federal regulations. We note that the regulations found at section 603 of title 20 of the Code of Federal Regulations send a clear message that "claim information" in the files of a state unemployment compensation agency is to be disclosed only to a "receiving agency," as defined in the regulations, or to other specified parties. *See* 20 C.F.R. § § 603.1 *et seq.*; *see also* Open Records Decision No. 476 at 4 (1987). Otherwise, pursuant to section 603.7 of title 20 of the Code of Federal Regulations, state unemployment compensation agencies, such as the commission, must protect the confidentiality of claim information. "Claim information" means information regarding whether an individual is receiving, has received, or has applied for unemployment compensation, as well as "[a]ny other information contained in the records of the State employment compensation agency which is needed by the requesting agency to verify eligibility for, and the amount of, benefits." 20 C.F.R. § 603.2(c)(1), (5). We also note that the names of employers and employees who file unemployment compensation appeals fall within the definition of "claim information" and that the federal regulations prohibit the commission from disclosing this information. *See* Open Records Decision No. 476 at 4 (1987).

You also argue that the federal Social Security Act requires states to comply with the directives of the United States Department of Labor (the "department") in administering state unemployment insurance ("UI") programs and that a department directive, UI Program Letter No. 34-97, specifies the conditions under which such claim information may be released. You do not inform us whether the release provisions of either part 603 or the UI Letter apply. Therefore, we conclude that, although the information at issue is confidential, it must be released if any of the release provisions in UI Program Letter No. 34-97 or part 603 of title 20 of the Code of Federal Regulations apply. *See* UI Program Letter 34-97 (allowing disclosure to "private entity under a written agreement which requires 'informed consent' from the individual to whom the information pertains"); 20 C.F.R. pt. 603. Otherwise, the commission must withhold the submitted information in its entirety pursuant to section 552.101 of the Government Code and these federal provisions.

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,

Michael A. Pearle
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

MAP/jh

Ref: ID# 206926
Enc: Submitted documents

c: Ms. Linda P. Wills
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(w/o enclosures)