ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

September 22, 2004

Mr. Brad Norton
Assistant City Attorney
City of Austin Law Department
P.O. Box 1088
Austin, Texas 78767-8845

OR2004-8101

Dear Mr. Norton:

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# 209634.

The City of Austin (the "city") received a request for information related to violations of patient confidentiality at one of the city's health clinics, the David Powell Clinic. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.107, and 552.117 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

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 protected by other statutes. Chapter 303 of the Occupations Code provides for the peer review of nurses. Section 303.006 of that chapter protects all communications made to nursing peer review committees and makes the proceedings of these committees confidential. Occ. Code § 303.006. The information protected by section 303.006 may be released only as provided in chapter 303. You state that the submitted information "reflects the proceedings of a nursing peer review committee and communications to that committee in its evaluation of the merits of a complaint concerning a nurse. . .employed at the City of Austin's David Powell Clinic." Based on your representations and our review of the submitted information, we find that the submitted information is protected under section 303.006 of the Occupations Code. As none of the

provisions of section 303.007 of the Occupations Code apply to the submitted information, it must be withheld in its entirety under section 552.101 of the Government Code. Because our ruling is dispositive, we need not address your remaining 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,

Lauren E. Kleine
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

LEK/jev

Ref: ID# 209634

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Mr. Dustin Rynders
1405 Montopolis Drive
Austin, Texas 78741
(w/o enclosures)