



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

April 8, 2005

Mr. Carey E. Smith
General Counsel
Texas Health and Human Services Commission
P.O. Box 13247
Austin, Texas 78711

OR2005-03022

Dear Mr. Smith:

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# 221622.

The Texas Health and Human Services Commission (the "commission") received a request for all files pertaining to the requestor's complaint filed against the commission. You state that you are releasing most of the requested information. You claim, however, 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.

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. You claim that sections 12.003 and 21.012 of the Human Resources Code make the submitted information confidential. Section 12.003 of the Human Resources Code provides in relevant part:

(a) Except for purposes directly connected with the administration of the department's assistance programs, it is an offense for a person to solicit, disclose, receive, or make use of, or to authorize, knowingly permit, participate in, or acquiesce in the use of the names of, *or any information concerning*, persons applying for or receiving assistance if the information is

directly or indirectly derived from the records, papers, files, or communications of the department or acquired by employees of the department in the performance of their official duties. [Emphasis added.]

Hum. Res. Code § 12.003(a). In Open Records Decision No. 584 (1991), this office concluded that “[t]he inclusion of the words ‘or any information’ juxtaposed with the prohibition on disclosure of the names of the department’s clients clearly expresses a legislative intent to encompass the broadest range of individual client information, and not merely the clients’ names and addresses.” Open Records Decision No. 584 at 3. Consequently, it is the specific information pertaining to individual clients, and not merely the clients’ identities, that is made confidential under section 12.003. See Hum. Res. Code § 21.012(a) (requiring provision of safeguards that restrict use or disclosure of information concerning applicants for or recipients of assistance programs to purposes directly connected with administration of programs); 42 C.F.R § 431.306(a) (“The [state] agency must have criteria specifying the conditions for release and use of information about [Medicaid] applicants and recipients.”), (d) (“agency must obtain permission from a family or individual, . . . , before responding to a request for information from an outside source”); Open Records Decision No. 166 (1977).

You state that the submitted documents contain information that identifies, or could lead to the identification of, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (“TANF”), food stamp, and Medicaid recipients. You further state that release of the submitted information is not “for purposes directly connected for use in the administration of a health and human service program.” See 42 C.F.R. § 431.302 (setting forth purposes directly related to state Medicaid and Medicare administration); 7 C.F.R. § 272.1(c) (use or disclosure of information obtained from food stamp applicant or recipient households is restricted to persons specifically listed herein); 45 C.F.R. § 205.50 (limits the use or disclosure of information concerning applicants and recipients of assistance under a state plan for financial assistance under title IV-A of the Social Security Act). Consequently, we agree that the commission must withhold the submitted information from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 12.003 of the Human Resource Code.¹

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

¹ As our ruling is dispositive, we need not address your remaining arguments against disclosure.

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, upon receiving this ruling, the governmental body will either release the public records promptly pursuant to section 552.221(a) of the Government Code or file a lawsuit challenging this ruling pursuant to section 552.324 of the Government Code. If the governmental body fails to do one of these things, 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); *Tex. 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,



Caroline E. Cho
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

CEC/sdk

Ref: ID# 221622

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Mr. Rex Ellis
5635 Eastside Avenue
Dallas, Texas 75214
(w/o enclosures)