



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

August 5, 2005

Mr. Michael P. Mondville
Assistant General Counsel
Texas Department of Criminal Justice
P.O. Box 4004
Huntsville, Texas 77342-4004

OR2005-07085

Dear Mr. Mondville:

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# 229946.

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (the "department") received a request for all records related to the requestor's client, who is currently incarcerated in a department facility.¹ You state that the department will make some of the requested information available to the requestor. You claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101 and 552.134 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

We first note that the submitted documents include medical records. Section 552.101 excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision" and encompasses information protected by other statutes, such as the Medical Privacy Act (the "MPA"), chapter 159 of the Occupations Code. Section 159.002 of the MPA provides in part:

¹You state that the department sought and received clarification from the requestor. Section 552.222 provides that a government body may make inquiry to the requestor to establish proper identification. Gov't Code § 552.222(a).

(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.

Occ. Code § 159.002(b), (c). This office has concluded that the protection afforded by section 159.002 extends only to records created by either a physician or someone under the supervision of a physician. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 487 (1987), 370 (1983), 343 (1982). Further, information that is subject to the MPA also includes information that was obtained from medical records. *See* Occ. Code. § 159.002(a), (b), (c); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 598 (1991).

Medical records must be released upon the governmental body's receipt of 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. Section 159.002(c) also requires that any subsequent release of medical records be consistent with the purposes for which the governmental body obtained the records. *See* Open Records Decision No. 565 at 7 (1990). We have marked the submitted information that is confidential under the MPA. As an attorney for the individual to whom this information pertains, the requestor may have a right of access to it. In any event, the department must not release the marked information unless it has authorization under the MPA to do so. *See* Open Records Decision No. 598 (1991).

The remaining submitted information includes fingerprints of the requestor's client. The public availability of this information is governed by sections 560.001, 560.002, and 560.003 of the Government Code. These sections provide as follows:

Sec. 560.001. DEFINITIONS. In this chapter:

- (1) "Biometric identifier" means a retina or iris scan, fingerprint, voiceprint, or record of hand or face geometry.
- (2) "Governmental body" has the meaning assigned by Section 552.003 [of the Government Code], except that the term includes each entity within or created by the judicial branch of state government.

Sec. 560.002. DISCLOSURE OF BIOMETRIC IDENTIFIER. A governmental body that possesses a biometric identifier of an individual:

(1) may not sell, lease, or otherwise disclose the biometric identifier to another person unless:

(A) the individual consents to the disclosure;

(B) the disclosure is required or permitted by a federal statute or by a state statute other than Chapter 552 [of the Government Code]; or

(C) the disclosure is made by or to a law enforcement agency for a law enforcement purpose; and

(2) shall store, transmit, and protect from disclosure the biometric identifier using reasonable care and in a manner that is the same as or more protective than the manner in which the governmental body stores, transmits, and protects its other confidential information.

Sec. 560.003. APPLICATION OF CHAPTER 552. A biometric identifier in the possession of a governmental body is exempt from disclosure under Chapter 552.

Gov't Code §§ 560.001, 560.002, 560.003. These sections are intended to protect the privacy of a living individual to whom a fingerprint or other biometric identifier pertains. *See id.* § 560.002(1)(A). In this instance, the requestor identifies himself as an attorney for the individual to whom the submitted fingerprints pertain. Consequently, we find that the requestor has a right of access to the submitted fingerprints under section 560.002(1)(A) of the Government Code.

We now consider the applicability of section 552.134 of the Government Code to the remaining submitted information. Section 552.134(a) relates to inmates of the department and provides in relevant part as follows:

(a) Except as provided by Subsection (b) or by Section 552.029 [of the Government Code], information obtained or maintained by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice is excepted from [required public disclosure] if it is information about an inmate who is confined in a facility operated by or under a contract with the department.

Gov't Code § 552.134(a). You state, and the submitted information reflects, that the remaining documents at issue concern an inmate confined in a facility operated by the

department. Thus, we agree that section 552.134 is applicable to the remaining submitted information. We also find that the exceptions in section 552.029 are not applicable. Therefore, the remaining submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.134 of the Government Code and must be withheld.

In summary, the marked medical records may only be released in accordance with the MPA. The marked fingerprints must be released to the requestor pursuant to section 560.002 of the Government Code. The department must withhold the remaining information under section 552.134 of the Government Code. As our ruling is dispositive, we need not consider 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, 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).

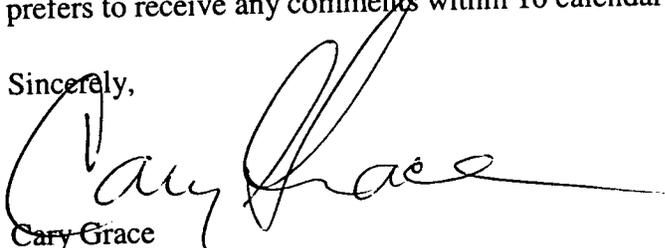
If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Tex. Dep't of Pub. Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ).

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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cary Grace", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Cary Grace
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

ECG/jev

Ref: ID# 229946

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Mr. David B. Bonham
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(w/o enclosures)