



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

August 9, 2005

Mr. Robert K. Nordhaus
Assistant City Attorney
City of San Antonio
P.O. Box 839966
San Antonio, Texas 78283-3966

OR2005-07199

Dear Mr. Nordhaus:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 232690.

The San Antonio Police Department (the "department") received three requests for information pertaining to an incident that occurred on December 17, 2004. You assert the requested 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.

Pursuant to section 552.301(b), a governmental body must ask for a decision from this office and state the exceptions that apply not later than the tenth business day after the date of receiving the written request. Further, pursuant to section 552.301(e), a governmental body is required to submit to this office within fifteen business days of receiving an open records 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. The department states it received the first request for information on January 21, 2005. The department did not request a decision from this office and did not submit the required information until July 17, 2005. Consequently, the department failed to comply with section 552.301(b) and section 552.301(e) of the Government Code.

Pursuant to section 552.302 of the Government Code, a governmental body's failure to comply with section 552.301 results in the legal presumption that the information is public and must be released. Information that is presumed public must be released unless a

governmental body demonstrates a compelling reason to withhold the information to overcome this presumption. *See Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379, 381-82 (Tex. App.—Austin 1990, no writ) (governmental body must make compelling demonstration to overcome presumption of openness pursuant to statutory predecessor to Gov't Code § 552.302); Open Records Decision No. 319 (1982). This office has held that a compelling reason exists to withhold information when the information is confidential by another source of law. *See Open Records Decision No. 150 (1977)* (presumption of openness overcome by a showing that the information is made confidential by another source of law or affects third party interests). The applicability of section 552.101 is such a compelling reason.

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. The submitted information includes a medical record, which is confidential under the Medical Practice Act (the “MPA”), chapter 159 of the Occupations Code. Section 159.002 of the MPA provides:

(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.

The medical record must be released upon 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. Occ. Code §§ 159.004, .005. Section 159.002(c) also requires that any subsequent release of a medical record be consistent with the purposes for which the governmental body obtained the record. Open Records Decision No. 565 at 7 (1990). A Medical record may be released only as provided under the MPA. Open Records Decision No. 598 (1991). We have marked the document subject to the MPA.

Section 261.201(a) of the Family Code provides as follows:

(a) The following information is confidential, is not subject to public release under Chapter 552, Government Code, and may be disclosed only for purposes consistent with this code and applicable federal or state law or under rules adopted by an investigating agency:

(1) a report of alleged or suspected abuse or neglect made under this chapter and the identity of the person making the report; and

(2) except as otherwise provided in this section, the files, reports, records, communications, audiotapes, videotapes, and working papers used or developed in an investigation under this chapter or in providing services as a result of an investigation.

The information at issue was used or developed in an investigation of child abuse. Thus, we find that the information is within the scope of section 261.201 of the Family Code. You have not indicated that the department has adopted a rule that governs the release of this type of information. Therefore, we assume that no such regulation exists. Given that assumption, the information is confidential pursuant to section 261.201 of the Family Code. *See* Open Records Decision No. 440 at 2 (1986) (predecessor statute). Accordingly, the department must withhold the information from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code as information made confidential by law.

We note the requestor contends she has a right of access to the information pursuant to section 552.023 of the Government Code. Section 552.023 provides a person's authorized representative has a special right of access to information held by a governmental body that relates to the person and that is protected from public disclosure by laws intended to protect the person's privacy interests. Here, release of this information is governed by the provisions of the MPA and chapter 261, not section 552.023. We have discussed the requestor's right of access under the MPA. Section 261.201(g) provides that if the investigation has been referred to the Department of Family and Protective Services ("DFPS"), a parent or other legal representative of a child who is a requestor may be entitled to access to DFPS' records, rather than the department's records. Section 261.201(g) of the Family Code provides that DFPS, upon request and subject to its own rules:

shall provide to the parent, managing conservator, or other legal representative of a child who is the subject of reported abuse or neglect information concerning the reported abuse or neglect that would otherwise be confidential under this section if the department has edited the information to protect the confidentiality of the identity of the person who made the report and any other person whose life or safety may be endangered by the disclosure.

Fam. Code § 261.201(g). Thus, the requestor does not have a special right of access to the information under section 552.023 of the Government 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 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,



Yen-Ha Le
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

YHL/sdk

Ref: ID# 232690

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Ms. Edna G. Elizondo
Smith & Carlson, P.C.
660 S.W. Military Drive, Suite M
San Antonio, Texas 78221-1645
(w/o enclosures)