



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

January 31, 2006

Mr. Edwin J. Cook
Regional Services Attorney
Texas Health and Human Services Commission
P.O. Box 960
Edinburg, Texas 78540-0960

OR2006-01037

Dear Mr. Cook:

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# 241370.

The Texas Health and Human Services Commission (the "commission") received a request for "any and all documents contained in [a named individual]'s file pertaining to the application for assistance in 2004."¹ You claim that 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.

Section 552.101 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. Sections 12.003 and 21.012 of the Human Resources Code prohibit the disclosure of information concerning clients of a state plan for assistance, except for a purpose directly connected with the administration of the plan. *See* Hum. Res. Code §§ 12.003, 21.012; *see also* Open Records Decision Nos. 584 (1991), 166 (1977). Section 12.003 provides in relevant part:

¹We note that the commission asked for and received clarification regarding this request. *See* Gov't Code § 552.222(b) (governmental body may communicate with requestor for purpose of clarifying or narrowing request for information); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 663 (1999) (discussing tolling of deadlines during period in which governmental body is awaiting clarification).

(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.

Hum. Res. Code § 12.003(a). The term "assistance" in sections 12.003 and 21.012 of the Human Resources Code includes "all forms of assistance and services for needy persons authorized by Subtitle C." *Id.* § 11.001(4); *see also id.* § 31.001 *et seq.* (subtitle C, pertaining to assistance programs).

In Open Records Decision No. 584 (1991), this office determined 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." *Id.* 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 also* 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).

In this instance, you state that the submitted documents pertain to the named individual's application for assistance and that release of such information in this instance would not be a release for purposes directly connected with the administration of the assistance program. Thus, we determine that the commission must withhold the submitted information pursuant to section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 12.003 of the Human Resources Code. *See* Attorney General Opinion JM-851 (1988) (confidentiality of client information continues after the death of the client)

You also ask this office to issue a previous determination that would permit the commission to withhold information relating to applicants for or recipients of commission assistance without the necessity of again requesting an attorney general decision under the Act. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(a); Open Records Decision No. 673 (2001). We decline to do so at this time. 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); *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 Office of the Attorney General 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. 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,



L. Joseph James
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

LJJ/segh

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Enc. Submitted documents

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(w/o enclosures)