



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

May 2, 2007

Mr. Christopher W. Ponder
Assistant District Attorney
Tarrant County
401 West Belknap
Fort Worth, Texas 76196-0201

OR2007-05105

Dear Mr. Ponder:

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# 277307.

The Tarrant County District Attorney's Office (the "district attorney") received a request for information regarding a deceased employee. You state you will release some information to the requestor, but claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.102, 552.111, 552.117, and 552.130 of the Government Code.¹ 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. You assert that the information submitted in Exhibit B is confidential under section 552.101 in conjunction with the Medical Practice Act ("MPA"), subtitle B of title 3 of the Occupations Code. Section 159.002 of the MPA provides in pertinent part:

¹Although you claim that the information submitted in Exhibit D constitutes attorney work product that is excepted from disclosure under section 552.107 of the Government Code, we note that the appropriate exception to disclosure to assert when claiming that information requested of a governmental body is protected from disclosure under the attorney work product privilege is section 552.111 of the Government Code. See Open Records Decision No. 677 at 9 (2002) (appropriate law for claim of attorney work product privilege for information not subject to section 552.022 is Gov't Code § 552.111).

(a) A communication between a physician and a patient, relative to or in connection with any professional services as a physician to the patient, is confidential and privileged and may not be disclosed except as provided by this chapter.

(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(a), (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). We note that the information submitted in Exhibit B was not created by a physician or by someone under the supervision of a physician. Thus, we conclude that the district attorney may not withhold this information pursuant to the MPA.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code also encompasses the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (the "ADA"), 42 U.S.C. §§ 12101 *et seq.* The ADA provides that information about the medical conditions and medical histories of applicants or employees must be 1) collected and maintained on separate forms, 2) kept in separate medical files, and 3) treated as a confidential medical record. In addition, an employer's medical examination or inquiry into the ability of an employee to perform job-related functions is to be treated as a confidential medical record. 29 C.F.R. § 1630.14(c); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 641 (1996). The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (the "EEOC") has determined that medical information for the purposes of the ADA includes "specific information about an individual's disability and related functional limitations, as well as general statements that an individual has a disability or that an ADA reasonable accommodation has been provided for a particular individual." *See* Letter from Ellen J. Vargyas, Legal Counsel, EEOC, to Barry Kearney, Associate General Counsel, National Labor Relations Board, 3 (Oct. 1, 1997).

Federal regulations define "disability" for purposes of the ADA as "(1) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of the individual; (2) a record of such an impairment; or (3) being regarded as having such an impairment." 29 C.F.R. § 1630.2(g). The regulations further provide that physical or mental impairment means: (1) Any physiological disorder, or condition, cosmetic disfigurement, or anatomical

loss affecting one or more of the following body systems: neurological, musculoskeletal, special sense organs, respiratory (including speech organs), cardiovascular, reproductive, digestive, genito-urinary, hemic and lymphatic, skin, and endocrine; or (2) Any mental or psychological disorder, such as mental retardation, organic brain syndrome, emotional or mental illness, and specific learning disabilities.

29 C.F.R. § 1630.2(h). Upon review, we have marked information in Exhibit B that is confidential under the ADA and must withheld on that basis under section 552.101 of the Government Code.

We next note that some of the submitted information is subject to the Family Medical Leave Act (the "FMLA"), section 2654 of title 29 of the United States Code, which is also encompassed by section 552.101 of the Government Code. Section 825.500 of chapter V of title 29 of the Code of Federal Regulations identifies the record-keeping requirements for employers that are subject to the FMLA. Subsection (g) of section 825.500 states that

[r]ecords and documents relating to medical certifications, recertifications or medical histories of employees or employees' family members, created for purposes of FMLA, shall be maintained as confidential medical records in separate files/records from the usual personnel files, and if ADA is also applicable, such records shall be maintained in conformance with ADA confidentiality requirements[], except that:

- (1) Supervisors and managers may be informed regarding necessary restrictions on the work or duties of an employee and necessary accommodations;
- (2) First aid and safety personnel may be informed (when appropriate) if the employee's physical or medical condition might require emergency treatment; and
- (3) Government officials investigating compliance with FMLA (or other pertinent law) shall be provided relevant information upon request.

29 C.F.R. § 825.500(g). Some of the submitted documents are confidential under section 825.500 of title 29 of the Code of Federal Regulations. Further, we find that none of the release provisions of the FMLA apply to these documents. Thus, we conclude that the district attorney must withhold the documents we have marked in Exhibit B pursuant to section 552.101 in conjunction with the FMLA.

Section 552.102(a) of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "information in a personnel file, the disclosure of which would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of

personal privacy.” Gov’t Code § 552.102(a). In *Hubert v. Harte-Hanks Texas Newspapers*, 652 S.W.2d 546 (Tex. App.—Austin 1983, writ ref’d n.r.e.), the court ruled that the test to be applied to information claimed to be protected under section 552.102(a) is the same as the test formulated by the Texas Supreme Court in *Industrial Foundation* for information claimed to be protected under the doctrine of common-law privacy as incorporated by section 552.101 of the Government Code. See *Indus. Found. v. Tex. Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668, 683-85. Accordingly, we will consider your section 552.101 and section 552.102(a) privacy claims together.

For information to be protected from public disclosure by the common-law right of privacy under section 552.101, the information must meet the criteria set out in *Industrial Foundation*. In *Industrial Foundation*, the Texas Supreme Court stated that information is excepted from disclosure if (1) the information contains highly intimate or embarrassing facts, the release of which would be highly objectionable to a reasonable person, and (2) the information is not of legitimate concern to the public. *Id.* at 685. In addition, this office has found that personal financial information not relating to a financial transaction between an individual and a governmental body is excepted from required public disclosure under common law privacy. See Open Records Decision No. 600 (1992) (public employee’s withholding allowance certificate, designation of beneficiary of employee’s retirement benefits, direct deposit authorization, and employee’s decisions regarding voluntary benefits programs, among others, are protected under common-law privacy). However, the right of privacy is purely personal and lapses upon death. See *Moore v. Charles B. Pierce Film Enters. Inc.*, 589 S.W.2d 489 (Tex. Civ. App.—Texarkana 1979, writ ref’d n.r.e.); see also Attorney General Opinions JM-229 (1984); H-917 (1976). We therefore conclude that the deceased individual’s privacy right in the information at issue has lapsed and so it may not be withheld on the basis of protecting the deceased individual’s privacy.

However, if the release of information about a deceased person reveals highly intimate or embarrassing information about living persons, the information must be withheld under common-law privacy. See Attorney General Opinion JM-229. Based on our review of the submitted information, we find that the information at issue does not reveal highly intimate or embarrassing information about a living individual. Therefore, no portion of the submitted information may be withheld on the basis of common-law privacy under section 552.101 of the Government Code.

Next, we address your assertion that Exhibit D constitutes attorney work product. Section 552.111 of the Government Code encompasses the attorney work product privilege found in Rule 192.5 of the Texas Rules of Civil Procedure. See *City of Garland v. Dallas Morning News*, 22 S.W.3d 351, 360 (Tex. 2000); Open Records Decision No. 677 at 4-8 (2002). Rule 192.5 defines work product as:

- (1) material prepared or mental impressions developed in anticipation of litigation or for trial by or for a party or a party’s representatives, including

the party's attorneys, consultants, sureties, indemnitors, insurers, employees, or agents; or

(2) a communication made in anticipation of litigation or for trial between a party and the party's representatives or among a party's representatives, including the party's attorneys, consultants, sureties, indemnitors, insurers, employees or agents.

TEX. R. CIV. P. 192.5(a). A governmental body seeking to withhold information under this exception bears the burden of demonstrating that the information was created or developed for trial or in anticipation of litigation by or for a party or a party's representative. TEX. R. CIV. P. 192.5; ORD 677 at 6-8. In order for this office to conclude that the information was made or developed in anticipation of litigation, we must be satisfied that 1) a reasonable person would have concluded from the totality of the circumstances surrounding the investigation that there was a substantial chance that litigation would ensue; and 2) the party resisting discovery believed in good faith that there was a substantial chance that litigation would ensue and [created or obtained the information] for the purpose of preparing for such litigation. *Nat'l Tank Co. v. Brotherton*, 851 S.W.2d 193, 207 (Tex. 1993). A "substantial chance" of litigation does not mean a statistical probability, but rather "that litigation is more than merely an abstract possibility or unwarranted fear." *Id.* at 204.

Upon review of the your arguments and the information submitted in Exhibit D, we find that you have not demonstrated that any of the information at issue was prepared for trial or in anticipation of litigation. Therefore, you may not withhold any of the information submitted in Exhibit D under section 552.111 of the Government Code as attorney work product.

We now address your claims under section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code, which excepts from public disclosure the present and former home addresses and telephone numbers, social security numbers, and family member information of current or former officials or employees of a governmental body who timely request that such information be kept confidential under section 552.024. Whether a particular piece of information is protected by section 552.117 must be determined at the time the request for it is made. *See* Open Records Decision No. 530 at 5 (1989).

You assert that the home address, home telephone number, family member information, and social security number of the deceased individual, which you have marked in Exhibit C, are excepted from disclosure under section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code. Section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code excepts from public disclosure the present and former home addresses and telephone numbers, social security numbers, and family member information of current or former officials or employees of a governmental body who timely request that such information be kept confidential under section 552.024. Gov't Code § 552.117. Whether a particular piece of information is protected by section 552.117 must be determined at the time the request for it is made. *See* Open Records Decision No. 530 at 5

(1989). Section 552.117(a)(1) deems certain information confidential only in order to protect the privacy of employees. Thus, the home address, home telephone number, social security number and information revealing whether the deceased employee has family members may not be withheld under section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code. *Cf.* Attorney General Opinions JM-229 (1984) (“the right of privacy lapses upon death”), H-917 (1976) (“We are . . . of the opinion that the Texas courts would follow the almost uniform rule of other jurisdictions that the right of privacy lapses upon death.”); Open Records Decision No. 272 (1981) (“the right of privacy is personal and lapses upon death”).

However, you inform us that the deceased employee’s surviving spouse is a current Tarrant County employee. Thus, to the extent the deceased individual’s surviving spouse, elected, prior to the date the district attorney received this request, to keep her home address, home telephone number, and family member information confidential, the district attorney must withhold the information we have marked in Exhibit C pursuant to section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code.

We note that you seek to withhold the deceased employee’s Texas driver’s license number under section 552.130 of the Government Code. Section 552.130 excepts from disclosure information that relates to a motor vehicle operator’s or driver’s license or permit issued by an agency of this state. *See* Gov’t Code § 552.130(a)(1). Because this exception also protects personal privacy, it is not applicable to the deceased individual’s Texas driver’s license number, and the district attorney may not withhold that information under section 552.130 of the Government Code.

In summary, the district attorney must withhold the documents we have marked in Exhibit B pursuant to section 552.101 in conjunction with the ADA and the FMLA. To the extent the deceased individual’s surviving spouse, elected, prior to the date the district attorney received this request, to keep her home address, home telephone number, and family member information confidential, the district attorney must withhold the information we have marked pursuant to section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code. The remaining information must be released to the requestor.²

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

²We note that the submitted information contains social security numbers. Section 552.147(b) of the Government Code authorizes a governmental body to redact a living person’s social security number from public release without the necessity of requesting a decision from this office under the Act.

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).

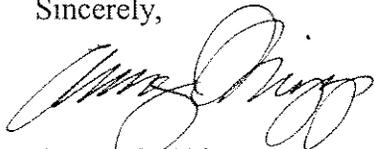
If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, upon receiving this ruling, the governmental body will either release the public records 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,



Amy L.S. Shipp
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

ALS/mcf

Ref: ID# 277307

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Ms. Kim McCoy
4175 Bob-O-Link Road
Gilmer, Texas 75645
(w/o enclosures)