



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

January 9, 2008

Mr. Paul J. Stewart
Assistant County Attorney
Fort Bend County Attorney's Office
301 Jackson Street Suite 728
Richmond, Texas 77469-3108

OR2008-00464

Dear Mr. Stewart:

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# 303347.

The Fort Bend County Sheriff's Office (the "sheriff") received a request for information relating to a specified offense report. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.108 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and have reviewed the information you submitted.¹

We first note that the submitted information includes medical records. Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision."² Gov't Code § 552.101. This exception encompasses information that other statutes make confidential. Medical

¹This letter ruling assumes that the submitted representative sample of information is truly representative of the requested information as a whole. This ruling neither reaches nor authorizes the sheriff to withhold any information that is substantially different from the submitted information. *See* Gov't Code §§ 552.301(e)(1)(D), .302; Open Records Decision Nos. 499 at 6 (1988), 497 at 4 (1988).

²Unlike other exceptions to disclosure, this office will raise section 552.101 on behalf of a governmental body, because the Act prescribes criminal penalties for the release of confidential information. *See* Gov't Code §§ 552.007, .352; Open Records Decision No. 325 at 2 (1982).

records are confidential under the Medical Practice Act (the “MPA”), subtitle B of title 3 of the Occupations Code. Section 159.002 of the MPA provides in part:

(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 determined that in governing access to a specific subset of information, the MPA prevails over the more general provisions of the Act. *See* Open Records Decision No. 598 (1991). Medical records must be released on 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. Any subsequent release of medical records must be consistent with the purposes for which the governmental body obtained the records. *See id.* § 159.002(c); Open Records Decision No. 565 (1990). We have marked medical records involving the requestor that must be withheld under the MPA, unless the sheriff receives consent for release of those records that complies with sections 159.004 and 159.005 of the MPA.

Section 552.108 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure “[i]nformation held by a law enforcement agency or prosecutor that deals with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of crime . . . if . . . release of the information would interfere with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of crime[.]” Gov’t Code § 552.108(a)(1). A governmental body must reasonably explain how and why section 552.108 is applicable to the information at issue. *See id.* § 552.301(e)(1)(A); *Ex parte Pruitt*, 551 S.W.2d 706 (Tex. 1977). You state that the remaining information is related to a pending criminal investigation and prospective prosecution. Based on your representations, we conclude that section 552.108(a)(1) is applicable in this instance. *See Houston Chronicle Publ’g Co. v. City of Houston*, 531 S.W.2d 177 (Tex. Civ. App. – Houston [14th Dist.] 1975), *writ ref’d n.r.e. per curiam*, 536 S.W.2d 559 (Tex. 1976) (court delineates law enforcement interests that are present in active cases).

Section 552.108 does not except from disclosure “basic information about an arrested person, an arrest, or a crime.” Gov’t Code § 552.108(c). Section 552.108(c) refers to the basic front-page information held to be public in *Houston Chronicle*. *See* 531 S.W.2d at 186-88. The sheriff must release basic information, including a detailed description of the offense, even if the information does not literally appear on the front page of an offense or arrest report.

See Open Records Decision No. 127 at 3-4 (1976) (summarizing types of information deemed public by *Houston Chronicle*). The sheriff may withhold the rest of the submitted information under section 552.108(a)(1).

In summary: (1) the marked medical records must be withheld under the MPA, unless the sheriff receives consent for release of those records that complies with sections 159.004 and 159.005 of the MPA; and (2) the sheriff may withhold the rest of the submitted information under section 552.108(a)(1) of the Government Code, except for the basic information that must be released under section 552.108(c).

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 file suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such a challenge, 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).

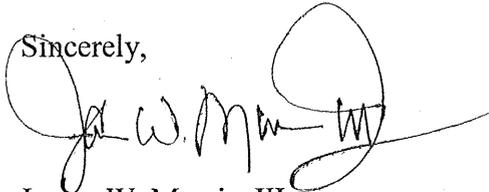
If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can challenge that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Dep't of Pub. Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ).

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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James W. Morris, III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

James W. Morris, III
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JWM/ma

Ref: ID# 303347

Enc: Submitted documents

c: Ms. Samantha Mitchell
10810 Old Needville Fairchild Road
Needville, Texas 77461
(w/o enclosures)