



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

February 21, 2008

Ms. Mary E. Reveles
Assistant County Attorney
Fort Bend County
301 Jackson Street, Suite 728
Richmond, Texas 77469-3108

OR2007-02365

Dear Ms. Reveles:

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# 302729.

The Fort Bend County Attorney's Office (the "county") received a request for specified information in a named employee's personnel file. You state that you have released a portion of the requested information to the requestor. You claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted sample of information.¹

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from public disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." Gov't Code § 552.101. This section encompasses the common-law right of privacy, which protects information if the information (1) contains highly intimate or embarrassing facts, the publication of which would be highly objectionable to a reasonable person, and (2) is not of legitimate concern to the public. *Indus. Found. v. Tex. Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668, 685 (Tex. 1976). In *Morales v. Ellen*, 840 S.W.2d 519 (Tex. App.— El Paso 1992, writ denied), the court addressed the applicability of the common-law privacy doctrine to files of

¹We assume that the "representative sample" of records submitted to this office is truly representative of the requested records as a whole. See Open Records Decision Nos. 499 (1988), 497 (1988). This open records letter does not reach, and therefore does not authorize the withholding of, any other requested records to the extent that those records contain substantially different types of information than that submitted to this office.

an investigation of allegations of sexual harassment. The investigation files in *Ellen* contained individual witness statements, an affidavit by the individual accused of the misconduct responding to the allegations, and conclusions of the board of inquiry that conducted the investigation. *Ellen*, 840 S.W.2d at 525. The court ordered the release of the affidavit of the person under investigation and the conclusions of the board of inquiry, stating that the public's interest was sufficiently served by the disclosure of such documents. *Id.* In concluding, the *Ellen* court held that "the public did not possess a legitimate interest in the identities of the individual witnesses, nor the details of their personal statements beyond what is contained in the documents that have been ordered released." *Id.*

Thus, if there is an adequate summary of an investigation of alleged sexual harassment, the investigation summary must be released along with the statement of the accused under *Ellen*, but the identities of the victims and witnesses of the alleged sexual harassment must be redacted, and their detailed statements must be withheld from disclosure. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 393 (1983), 339 (1982). If no adequate summary of the investigation exists, then all of the information relating to the investigation ordinarily must be released, with the exception of information that would identify the victims and witnesses. Since common-law privacy does not protect information about a public employee's alleged misconduct on the job or complaints made about a public employee's job performance, the identity of the individual accused of sexual harassment is not protected from public disclosure. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 438 (1986), 405 (1983), 230 (1979), 219 (1978).

The submitted information contains an adequate summary of the investigation into alleged sexual harassment and a statement by the individual who was accused of sexual harassment. The summary and statement of the accused are thus not confidential under common-law privacy; however, information within these documents identifying the alleged victim and witnesses, which we have marked, is confidential under common-law privacy and must be withheld pursuant to section 552.101 of the Government Code. *See Ellen*, 840 S.W.2d at 525. However we note that supervisors are not witnesses for purposes of *Ellen*, and thus, supervisors' identities may generally not be withheld under section 552.101 of the Government Code and common-law privacy. Therefore, pursuant to section 552.101 and the ruling in *Ellen*, the marked summaries are not confidential, but the remaining submitted information, and the identifying information of the alleged victim and witnesses which we have marked, must be withheld under section 552.101 in conjunction with common-law privacy. *See id.*

We also note that section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code may be applicable to a portion of the information we have marked in the summary and statement of the accused.² Section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code excepts from disclosure the current and

²The Office of the Attorney General will raise a mandatory exception, such as section 552.117, on behalf of a governmental body, but ordinarily will not raise other exceptions. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 481 (1987), 480 (1987), 470 (1987).

former home addresses, telephone numbers, social security numbers, and family member information of current or former officials or employees of a governmental body who request that this information be kept confidential under section 552.024 of the Government Code. Gov't § 552.117(a)(1). Whether a particular piece of information is protected under section 552.117(a)(1) must be determined at the time the request for it is made. *See* Open Records Decision No. 530 at 5 (1989). Thus, pursuant to section 552.117(a)(1), if the employee at issue made a timely election to keep his information confidential, then the county must withhold the employee's personal information. Accordingly, we have marked the information in the statement of the accused that must be withheld under section 552.117(a)(1) if that section applies.

In summary, the county must withhold the victim and witness information marked in the summary and statement of the accused under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common-law privacy and the holding in *Ellen*. If the employee at issue made a timely election to keep his information confidential, then you must withhold the employee's information in the summary and statement of the accused marked under section 552.117 of the Government Code. The remaining portions of the report summary and the statement of the accused that have not been marked must be released to the requestor. You must withhold the remaining information under section 552.101 in conjunction with common-law privacy.

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

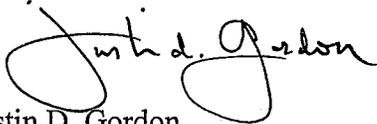
free, at (877) 673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

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,



Justin D. Gordon
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JDG/eeg

Ref: ID# 302729

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Ms. Tennille Jones
1419 Sand Lake Lane
Richmond, Texas 77469
(w/o enclosures)