



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

June 11, 2008

Mr. David M. Swope
Assistant County Attorney
Harris County Attorney's Office
1019 Congress, 15th Floor
Houston, Texas 77002

OR2008-07985

Dear Mr. Swope:

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# 312701.

The Harris County Attorney's Office ("county attorney") received a request for information relating to the autopsies of two individuals and the Harris County Medical Examiner (the "medical examiner") received four requests for information relating to the autopsies of the same two individuals. You state that the county attorney does not have any documents responsive to the request.¹ You claim that the responsive information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.108 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

You inform us that a portion of the information at issue was the subject of a previous request for information, as a result of which this office issued Open Records Letter No. 2008-06286 (2008). In that letter ruling, we concluded that the medical examiner must withhold the submitted autopsy report under section 552.108(a)(1) of the Government Code. As the pertinent facts and circumstances have not changed since the issuance of Open Records Letter No. 2008-06286, the medical examiner must continue to rely on Open Records Letter No. 2008-06286 for the information that was at issue in that prior ruling. *See* Open Records Decision No. 673 (2001) (so long as law, facts, and circumstances on which prior ruling was

¹We note that the Act does not require a governmental body to release information that did not exist when it received a request or create responsive information. *See Econ. Opportunities Dev. Corp. v. Bustamante*, 562 S.W.2d 266 (Tex. Civ. App.—San Antonio 1978, writ dismissed); Open Records Decision Nos. 605 at 2 (1992), 555 at 1 (1990), 452 at 3 (1986), 362 at 2 (1983).

based have not changed, first type of previous determination exists where requested information is precisely same information as was addressed in prior attorney general ruling, ruling is addressed to same governmental body, and ruling concludes that information is or is not excepted from disclosure). For the information not previously ruled upon, we will address the submitted argument.

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). Section 552.108 may be invoked by the proper custodian of information relating to a pending investigation or prosecution of criminal conduct. *See* Open Records Decision No. 474 at 4-5 (1987). Where a non-law enforcement agency has custody of information that would otherwise qualify for exception under section 552.108 as information relating to the pending case of a law enforcement agency, the custodian of the records may withhold the information if it provides this office with a demonstration that the information relates to the pending case and a representation from the law enforcement agency that it wishes to have the information withheld. You inform us, and have provided an affidavit stating, that the Harris County District Attorney’s Office objects to disclosure of the remaining submitted information because its release would interfere with a pending criminal investigation. Based on your representation and the submitted affidavit, we conclude that the medical examiner may withhold the submitted information under section 552.108(a)(1) of the Government Code. *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).

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

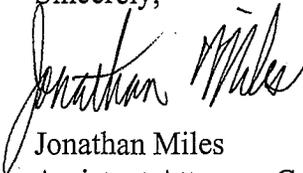
statute, the attorney general expects that, upon receiving this ruling, the governmental body will either release the public records promptly pursuant to section 552.221(a) of the Government Code or file a lawsuit challenging this ruling pursuant to section 552.324 of the Government Code. If the governmental 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,



Jonathan Miles
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JM/jh

Ref: ID# 312701

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Mr. John Steiger
Assignment Editor
KPRC-TV
P.O. Box 2222
Houston, Texas 77252
(w/o enclosures)

Mr. Jose Carrera
Diario El Dia
6120 Tarnef, Suite 100
Houston, Texas 77074
(w/o enclosures)

Ms. Julie Griffin
KTRK-TV
3310 Bissonnet
Houston, Texas 77001
(w/o enclosures)

Mr. Eric Hanson
Houston Chronicle
P.O. Box 4260
Houston, Texas 77210
(w/o enclosures)