



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

August 11, 2008

Ms. Eileen McPhee
Carls, McDonald & Dalrymple, L.L.P.
Baron Oaks Plaza 2
901 South Mopac Expressway, Suite 500
Austin, Texas 78746

OR2008-10905

Dear Ms. McPhee:

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# 318617.

The Georgetown Police Department (the "department") received five requests for a copy of a report involving a named deceased individual. You state that you are releasing most of the responsive information. 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 information.

Initially, you acknowledge, and we agree, that you failed to comply with the procedural requirements of section 552.301 of the Government Code with respect to one of the requests. Pursuant to section 552.302 of the Government Code, a governmental body's failure to comply with the procedural requirements of section 552.301 results in the legal presumption that the requested information is public and must be released unless the governmental body demonstrates a compelling reason to withhold the information from disclosure. *See id.* § 552.302; *Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379, 381-82 (Tex. App.—Austin 1990, no writ) (governmental body must make compelling demonstration to overcome presumption of openness pursuant to statutory predecessor to section 552.302); Open Records Decision No. 319 (1982). A compelling reason exists when third-party interests are at stake or when information is confidential under other law. Open Records Decision No. 150 (1977). Because section 552.101 can provide a compelling reason to withhold information, we will address your arguments under this exception.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code exempts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." Gov't Code § 552.101. Section 552.101 encompasses information protected by other statutes. You assert that a portion of the information within the submitted police report should be withheld under section 552.101 in conjunction with the Medical Practices Act (the "MPA"). Section 159.002 of the MPA provides in part:

- (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.

Id. § 159.002(a)-(c). Information subject to the MPA includes both medical records and information obtained from those medical records. See Open Records Decision No. 598 (1991). 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 section 159.001 of the MPA defines "patient" as a person who consults with or is seen by a physician to receive medical care. See Occ. Code § 159.001(3). Under this definition, a deceased person cannot be a "patient" under section 159.002 of the MPA. Thus, section 159.002 is applicable only to medical records of a person who was alive at the time of the creation of the records. Upon review, the department has failed to demonstrate how any portion of the submitted information constitutes a record of the identity, diagnosis, evaluation, or treatment of a patient by a physician for the purposes of the MPA. Accordingly, none of the submitted information may be withheld on that basis.

Section 552.101 also encompasses the doctrine of common-law privacy, which protects information if (1) the information contains highly intimate or embarrassing facts the publication of which would be highly objectionable to a reasonable person, and (2) the information is not of legitimate concern to the public. *Indus. Found. v. Tex. Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668, 685 (Tex. 1976). The types of information considered intimate and embarrassing by the Texas Supreme Court in *Industrial Foundation* included information relating to sexual assault, pregnancy, mental or physical abuse in the workplace, illegitimate children, psychiatric treatment of mental disorders, attempted suicide, and injuries to sexual

organs. *Id.* at 683. This office has found that some kinds of medical information or information indicating disabilities or specific illnesses are excepted from required public disclosure under common-law privacy. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 470 (1987) (illness from severe emotional and job-related stress), 455 (1987) (prescription drugs, illnesses, operations, and physical handicaps). However, we find that the department has failed to demonstrate how the information you have marked contains highly intimate or embarrassing facts the publication of which would be highly objectionable to a reasonable person. Accordingly, no portion of the submitted information may be withheld on this basis. As you raise no other exceptions against disclosure, the submitted information must be released in its entirety.

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). If the governmental body does not file suit over 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,



Chris Schulz
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

CS/mcf

Ref: ID# 318617

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Mr. James Finch
United Fire Casualty
23 Meadow Run
Round Rock, Texas 78664
(w/o enclosures)

Ms. Karen Rider
Investigations Unlimited
P.O. Box 27798
Cedar Park, Texas 78613
(w/o enclosures)

Mr. Jerry Kearns
1033 La Posada, Suite 375
Austin, Texas 78752
(w/o enclosures)

Ms. Jan E. Duncan, CP
Senior Paralegal
Thompson, Coe, Cousins & Iron, L.L.P.
701 Brazos
Suite 1500 Austin Centre
Austin, Texas 78701
(w/o enclosures)

Mr. Craig J. Tobin
3004 South Austin Avenue
Georgetown, Texas 78626
(w/o enclosures)