ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

June 2, 2009

Ms. Margo M. Kaiser
Staff Attorney
Texas Workforce Commission
101 East 15th Street
Austin, Texas 78778-0001

OR2009-07504

Dear Ms. Kaiser:

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# 344605 (TWC Tracking No. 090313-035).

The Texas Workforce Commission (the "commission") received a request for information relating to a specified complaint of employment discrimination. You state that some of the requested information will be released. You claim that the remaining information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.111, and 552.137 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the representative sample of information.[1]

The commission contends that the information at issue is subject to the federal Freedom of Information Act ("FOIA"). Section 2000e-5(b) of title 42 of the United States Code provides in relevant part:

> Whenever a charge is filed by or on behalf of a person claiming to be aggrieved . . . alleging that an employer . . . has engaged in an unlawful employment practice, the [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (the "EEOC")] shall serve a notice of the charge . . . on such employer . . . and shall make an investigation thereof . . . Charges shall not be made public by the [EEOC].

42 U.S.C. § 2000e-5(b). The EEOC is authorized by statute to utilize the services of state fair employment practices agencies to assist in meeting its statutory mandate to enforce laws

[1]This 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 commission 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)

prohibiting discrimination. *See id.* § 2000e-4(g)(1). The commission informs us that it has a contract with the EEOC to investigate claims of employment discrimination. The commission asserts that under the terms of this contract, "access to charge and complaint files is governed by FOIA, including the exceptions to disclosure found in the FOIA." The commission claims that because the EEOC would withhold the submitted information under section 552(b)(5) of title 5 of the United States Code, the commission should also withhold the information on that basis. We note, however, that FOIA is applicable to information held by an agency of the federal government. *See* 5 U.S.C. § 551(1). The information at issue was created and is maintained by the commission, which is subject to the state laws of Texas. *See* Attorney General Opinion MW-95 (1979) (FOIA exceptions apply to federal agencies, not to state agencies); Open Records Decision Nos. 496 (1988), 124 (1976); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 561 at 7 n.3 (1990) (federal authorities may apply confidentiality principles found in FOIA differently from way in which such principles are applied under Texas open records law); *Davidson v. Georgia*, 622 F.2d 895, 897 (5th Cir. 1980) (state governments are not subject to FOIA). Furthermore, this office has stated in numerous opinions that information in the possession of a governmental body of the State of Texas is not confidential or excepted from disclosure merely because the same information is or would be confidential in the hands of a federal agency. *See, e.g.*, Attorney General Opinion MW-95 (1979) (neither FOIA nor federal Privacy Act of 1974 applies to records held by state or local governmental bodies in Texas); Open Records Decision No.124 (1976) (fact that information held by federal agency is excepted by FOIA does not necessarily mean that same information is excepted under the Act when held by Texas governmental body). You do not cite to any federal law, nor are we aware of any such law, that would pre-empt the applicability of the Act and allow the EEOC to make FOIA applicable to information created and maintained by a state agency. *See* Attorney General Opinion JM-830 (1987) (EEOC lacks authority to require a state agency to ignore state statutes). Thus, you have not shown how the contract between the EEOC and the commission makes FOIA applicable to the commission in this instance. Accordingly, the commission may not withhold the information at issue pursuant to FOIA.

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. This exception encompasses information that other statutes make confidential. Pursuant to section 21.204 of the Labor Code, the commission may investigate a complaint of an unlawful employment practice. *See* Labor Code § 21.204; *see also id.* §§ 21.0015 (powers of Commission on Human Rights under Labor Code chapter 21 transferred to commission's civil rights division); 21.201. Section 21.304 of the Labor Code provides that "[a]n officer or employee of the commission may not disclose to the public information obtained by the commission under Section 21.204 except as necessary to the conduct of a proceeding under this chapter." *Id.* § 21.304.

You indicate that the information at issue pertains to a complaint of unlawful employment discrimination that was investigated by the commission under section 21.204 and on behalf of the EEOC. We therefore agree that the information at issue is confidential under

section 21.304 of the Labor Code. In the instance, however, the requestor is an attorney representing a party to the complaint. Section 21.305 of the Labor Code addresses the release of commission records to a party to a complaint filed under section 21.201 of the Labor Code and provides as follows:

> (a) The commission shall adopt rules allowing a party to a complaint filed under Section 21.201 reasonable access to commission records relating to the complaint.
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> (b) Unless the complaint is resolved through a voluntary settlement or conciliation, on the written request of a party the executive director shall allow the party access to the commission records:
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> > (1) after the final action of the commission; or
> >
> > (2) if a civil action relating to the complaint is filed in federal court alleging a violation of federal law.

Id. § 21.305. At section 819.92 of title 40 of the Texas Administrative Code, the commission has adopted rules that govern access to its records by a party to a complaint. Section 819.92 provides as follows:

> (a) Pursuant to Texas Labor Code § 21.304 and § 21.305, [the commission] shall, on written request of a party to a perfected complaint under Texas Labor Code § 21.201, allow the party access to [the commission's] records, unless the perfected complaint has been resolved through a voluntary settlement or conciliation agreement:
>
> > (1) following the final action of [the commission]; or
> >
> > (2) if a party to the perfected complaint or the party's attorney certifies in writing that a civil action relating to the perfected complaint is pending in federal court alleging a violation of federal law.
>
> (b) Pursuant to the authority granted the [c]ommission in Texas Labor Code § 21.305, reasonable access shall not include access to the following:
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> > (1) information excepted from required disclosure under Texas Government Code, chapter 552; or
> >
> > (2) investigator notes.

40 T.A.C. § 819.92. The commission states that the "purpose of the rule amendment is to clarify in rule the [c]ommission's determination of what materials are available to the parties in a civil rights matter and what materials are beyond what would constitute reasonable access to the file."[2] 32 Tex. Reg. 553. A governmental body must have statutory authority to promulgate a rule. *See Railroad Comm'n v. ARCO Oil*, 876 S.W.2d 473 (Tex. App.—Austin 1994, writ denied). A governmental body has no authority to adopt a rule that is inconsistent with existing state law. *Id.*; *see also Edgewood Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Meno*, 917 S.W.2d 717, 750 (Tex. 1995); Attorney General Opinion GA-497 (2006) (in deciding whether governmental body has exceeded its rule making powers, determinative factor is whether provisions of rule are in harmony with general objectives of statute at issue).

As noted above, section 21.305 of the Labor Code requires the release of commission complaint records to a party to a complaint under certain circumstances. *See* Labor Code § 21.305. In correspondence to our office, you contend that under section 819.92(b) of the rule, the Act's exceptions apply to withhold information in a commission file even when requested by a party to the complaint. *See* 40 T.A.C. § 819.92(b). Section 21.305 of the Labor Code states that the commission "*shall* allow the party access to the commission's records." *See* Labor Code § 21.305 (emphasis added). The commission's rule in subsection 819.92(b) operates as a denial of access to complaint information provided by subsection 819.92(a). *See* 40 T.A.C. § 819.92. Further, the rule conflicts with the mandated party access provided by section 21.305 of the Labor Code. The commission submits no arguments or explanation to resolve this conflict and submits no arguments to support its conclusion that section 21.305's grant of authority to promulgate rules regarding reasonable access permits the commission to deny party access entirely. Being unable to resolve this conflict, we cannot find that rule 819.92(b) operates in harmony with the general objectives of section 21.305 of the Labor Code. Thus, we must make our determination under section 21.305 of the Labor Code. *See Edgewood*, 917 S.W.2d at 750.

You state that there has been final agency action taken in this case. You do not indicate that the complaint was resolved through a voluntary settlement or conciliation agreement. Therefore, pursuant to section 21.305 of the Labor Code and section 819.92(a) of title 40 of the Texas Administrative Code, the requestor has a right of access to the commission's records relating to the complaint.

Turning to your claim under section 552.111 of the Government Code, we note that this office has long held that information that is specifically made public by statute may not be withheld from the public under any of the exceptions to public disclosure under the Act. *See, e.g.*, Open Records Decision Nos. 544 (1990), 378 (1983), 161 (1977), 146 (1976). However,

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[2]The commission states that the amended rule was adopted pursuant to sections 301.0015 and 302.002(d) of the Labor Code, "which provide the [c]ommission with the authority to adopt, amend, or repeal such rules as it deems necessary for the effective administration of [commission] services and activities." 32 Tex. Reg. 554. The commission also states that section 21.305 of the Labor Code "provides the [c]ommission with the authority to adopt rules allowing a party to a complaint filed under § 21.201 reasonable access to [c]ommission records relating to the complaint." *Id.*

the commission seeks to withhold the information at issue under section 552.111. In support of this contention, you argue that in *Mace v. EEOC*, 37 F. Supp.2d 1144 (E.D. Mo. 1999), a federal court recognized a similar exception by finding that "the EEOC could withhold an investigator's memorandum as predecisional under [FOIA] as part of the deliberative process." In the *Mace* decision, however, there was no access provision analogous to sections 21.305 and 819.92. The court did not have to decide whether the EEOC could withhold the document under section 552(b)(5) of title 5 of the United States Code despite the applicability of an access provision. We therefore conclude that the present case is distinguishable from the court's decision in *Mace*. Furthermore, in Open Records Decision No. 534 (1989), this office examined whether the statutory predecessor to section 21.304 of the Labor Code protected from disclosure the Commission on Human Rights' investigative files into discrimination charges filed with the EEOC. We stated that while the statutory predecessor to section 21.304 of the Labor Code made all information collected or created by the Commission on Human Rights during its investigation of a complaint confidential, "[t]his does not mean, however, that the commission is authorized to withhold the information from the parties subject to the investigation." *See* Open Records Decision No. 534 at 7 (1989). Therefore, we concluded that the release provision grants a special right of access to a party to a complaint. Thus, because access to the commission's records created under section 21.201 of the Labor Code is governed by section 21.305 and section 819.92 of title 40 of the Texas Administrative Code, we conclude that the commission may not withhold the information at issue under section 552.111 of the Government Code.

You also seek to withhold information pertaining to mediation and conciliation efforts under section 21.207 of the Labor Code, which provides in part:

> (b) Without the written consent of the complainant and respondent, the commission, its executive director, or its other officers or employees may not disclose to the public information about the efforts in a particular case to resolve an alleged discriminatory practice by conference, conciliation, or persuasion, regardless of whether there is a determination of reasonable cause.

Labor Code § 21.207(b). You contend that some of the information at issue relates to efforts at mediation or conciliation between the parties to the dispute. You state that the commission has not received the written consent of both parties to release that information. You have marked the information in question. Based on your representations and our review, we agree that some of the information in question is confidential under section 21.207(b) of the Labor Code. However, we find that some of the information that you have marked does not disclose efforts to resolve a case by mediation or conciliation. We therefore conclude that, with the exception of the information that we have marked for release, the commission must withhold the information you have marked under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 21.207(b) of the Labor Code.

You also assert that portions of the submitted information are excepted from disclosure under section 552.137 of the Government Code. However, because the requestor in this instance has a statutory right of access to the information at issue, the commission may not withhold this information from the requestor pursuant to sections 552.137. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 623 at 3 (1994) (exceptions in the Act generally inapplicable to information that statutes expressly make public), 613 at 4 (1993) (exceptions in Act cannot impinge on statutory right of access to information), 451 (1986) (specific statutory right of access provisions overcome general exceptions to disclosure under the Act).

In summary, with the exception of the information we have marked for release, the commission must withhold the information relating to efforts at mediation or conciliation under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 21.207 of the Labor Code. The rest of the submitted information must be released.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular information 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 information or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For more information concerning those rights and responsibilities, please visit our website at http://www.oag.state.tx.us/open/index_orl.php, or call the Office of the Attorney General's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. Questions concerning the allowable charges for providing public information under the Act must be directed to the Cost Rules Administrator of the Office of the Attorney General at (512) 475-2497.

Sincerely,

Pamela Wissemann
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

PFW/jb

Ref: ID# 344605

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)