



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

August 14, 2009

Ms. Neera Chatterjee
Public Information Coordinator
The University of Texas System
Office of General Counsel
201 West Seventh Street
Austin, Texas 78701-2902

OR2009-11393

Dear Ms. Chatterjee:

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# 352232.

The University of Texas at Brownsville (the "university") received a request for all information related to a grievance investigation regarding the requestor. You claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.103 and 552.107 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted representative sample of information.¹

Initially, you state portions of the requested information were the subject of previous requests for information, as a result of which this office issued Open Records Letter Nos. 2009-08451 (2009), 2009-09435 (2009), 2009-10805 (2009), 2009-10331 (2009), and 2009-10736 (2009). You have not indicated the facts and circumstances have changed since the issuance of these prior rulings. Thus, with regard to the submitted information that is identical to the information previously requested and ruled on by this office, we conclude the university must

¹ We assume 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 those records contain substantially different types of information than that submitted to this office.

continue to rely on our rulings in Open Records Letter Nos. 2009-08451, 2009-09435, 2009-10805, 2009-10331, and 2009-10736 as previous determinations and withhold or release the information at issue in accordance with those decisions. See Open Records Decision No. 673 (2001) (so long as law, facts, and circumstances on which prior ruling was based have not changed, first type of previous determination exists where requested information is precisely same information as was addressed in a prior attorney general ruling, ruling is addressed to same governmental body, and ruling concludes that information is or is not excepted from disclosure). To the extent the requested information is not encompassed by the prior rulings, we will consider your submitted arguments.

Section 552.107(1) of the Government Code protects information coming within the attorney-client privilege. When asserting the attorney-client privilege, a governmental body has the burden of providing the necessary facts to demonstrate the elements of the privilege in order to withhold the information at issue. Open Records Decision No. 676 at 6-7 (2002). First, a governmental body must demonstrate that the information constitutes or documents a communication. *Id.* at 7. Second, the communication must have been made “for the purpose of facilitating the rendition of professional legal services” to the client governmental body. Tex. R. Evid. 503(b)(1). The privilege does not apply when an attorney or representative is involved in some capacity other than that of providing or facilitating professional legal services to the client governmental body. *In re Texas Farmers Ins. Exch.*, 990 S.W.2d 337, 340 (Tex. App.—Texarkana 1999, orig. proceeding) (attorney-client privilege does not apply if attorney acting in a capacity other than that of attorney). Governmental attorneys often act in capacities other than that of professional legal counsel, such as administrators, investigators, or managers. Thus, the mere fact that a communication involves an attorney for the government does not demonstrate this element. Third, the privilege applies only to communications between or among clients, client representatives, lawyers, lawyer representatives, and a lawyer representing another party in a pending action and concerning a matter of common interest therein. See Tex. R. Evid. 503(b)(1)(A)-(E). Thus, a governmental body must inform this office of the identities and capacities of the individuals to whom each communication at issue has been made. Lastly, the attorney-client privilege applies only to a confidential communication, *id.* 503(b)(1), meaning it was “not intended to be disclosed to third persons other than those to whom disclosure is made in furtherance of the rendition of professional legal services to the client or those reasonably necessary for the transmission of the communication.” *Id.* 503(a)(5).

Whether a communication meets this definition depends on the intent of the parties involved at the time the information was communicated. *Osborne v. Johnson*, 954 S.W.2d 180, 184 (Tex. App.—Waco 1997, no writ). Moreover, because the client may elect to waive the privilege at any time, a governmental body must explain that the confidentiality of a communication has been maintained. Section 552.107(1) generally excepts an entire communication that is demonstrated to be protected by the attorney-client privilege, unless

otherwise waived by the governmental body. *See Huie v. DeShazo*, 922 S.W.2d 920, 923 (Tex. 1996) (privilege extends to entire communication, including facts contained therein).

You state that the submitted e-mails constitute communications between and amongst university staff and university attorneys that were made for the purpose of providing legal advice to the university. You have identified the parties to the communications. You state that these communications were made in confidence and have maintained their confidentiality. Based on your representations and our review, we find you have demonstrated the applicability of the attorney-client privilege to the submitted information. Accordingly, the university may withhold the submitted information under section 552.107 of the Government Code.

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,

Chris Schulz
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

CS/cc

Ref: ID# 352232

Enc. Submitted documents

cc: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)