



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

October 4, 2010

Mr. David Daugherty
Assistant County Attorney
Harris County
1019 Congress, 15th Floor
Houston, Texas 77002-1700

OR2010-15080

Dear Mr. Daugherty:

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# 399967.

The Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences (the "institute") received two requests for the autopsy report for a named individual. You claim that the submitted 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.

Initially, we must address the institute's obligations under section 552.301 of the Government Code. Section 552.301 prescribes the procedural obligations that a governmental body must follow in asking this office to decide whether requested information is excepted from public disclosure. Section 552.301(b) requires that a governmental body ask for a decision from this office and state which exceptions apply to the requested information by the tenth business day after receiving the request. Gov't Code § 552.301(b). You state the institute received the first request for information on August 25, 2010, and the second request on August 31, 2010. We note this office does not count the date the request was received or holidays for the purpose of calculating a governmental body's deadlines under the Act. You state September 6, 2010 was a Harris County holiday; therefore, the ten-business-day deadlines for the first and second requests were September 9, 2010, and September 15, 2010, respectively. The institute requested a ruling from this office on September 10, 2010. Consequently, with respect to the first request, the institute failed to

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request a decision from this office within the ten-business-day period prescribed by subsection 552.301(b).

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 information is public and must be released unless the governmental body demonstrates a compelling reason to withhold the information to overcome this presumption. *Id.* § 552.302; *Simmons v. Kuzmich*, 166 S.W.3d 342, 350 (Tex. App.—Fort Worth 2005, no pet.); *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. 630 (1994). A compelling reason generally exists when information is confidential by law or third-party interests are at stake. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 630 at 3, 325 at 2 (1982). Although you raise section 552.108 of the Government Code, this section is a discretionary exception to disclosure that protects a governmental body's interests and may be waived. *See* Gov't Code § 552.007; Open Records Decision Nos. 663 at 5 (1999) (untimely request for decision resulted in waiver of discretionary exceptions), 177 (1997) (statutory predecessor to section 552.108 subject to waiver). However, the need of a governmental body, other than the one that is seeking an open records decision, to withhold information under section 552.108 of the Government Code can provide a compelling reason to withhold information from disclosure. Open Records Decision No. 586 (1991). Because you inform us, and provide an affidavit to demonstrate, that the Harris County Sheriff's Office (the "sheriff") objects to the release of the requested information, we will consider whether the institute may withhold the submitted information on behalf of the sheriff under section 552.108.

Section 552.108(a)(1) 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 claiming section 552.108 must reasonably explain how and why release of the requested information would interfere with law enforcement. *See id.* §§ 552.108(a)(1), .301(e)(1)(A); *see also Ex parte Pruitt*, 551 S.W.2d 706 (Tex. 1977). The sheriff states that the submitted information relates to a pending criminal investigation. Based on the sheriff's representation and our review of the submitted information, we conclude that the release of this information would interfere with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of crime. *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). Thus, the institute may withhold the submitted information in its entirety under section 552.108(a)(1) of the Government Code on behalf of the sheriff.

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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, toll free at (888) 672-6787.

Sincerely,



Lindsay E. Hale
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

LEH/sdk

Ref: ID# 399967

Enc. Submitted documents

c: 2 Requestors
(w/o enclosures)