



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

February 16, 2012

Ms. Ashley D. Fourt
Assistant District Attorney
Tarrant County
401 West Belknap, Ninth Floor
Fort Worth, Texas 76196

OR2012-02433

Dear Ms. Fourt:

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# 449510.

The Tarrant County Medical Examiner's Office (the "medical examiner's office") received a request for a specified autopsy report. You claim the requested information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.108 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the information you submitted.

We note the medical examiner's office did not comply with section 552.301 of the Government Code in requesting this decision. Section 552.301 prescribes procedures a governmental body must follow in asking this office to determine whether requested information is excepted from public disclosure. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(a). Section 552.301(b) requires the governmental body to ask for the attorney general's decision and claim its exceptions to disclosure not later than the tenth business day after the date of its receipt of the written request for information. *See id.* § 552.301(b).

You state the medical examiner's office received the request for information on January 9, 2012. We note January 16, 2012, was a holiday. Thus, the tenth business day after the receipt of the instant request was January 24, 2012. However, the envelope in which the medical examiner's office sent its request for a ruling to this office was meter-marked January 25, 2011. *See id.* § 552.308 (describing rules for calculating submission dates of documents sent via first class United States mail, common or contract carrier, or

interagency mail). Accordingly, the medical examiner's office did not request a decision from this office within the ten-business-day period prescribed by subsection 552.301(b).

Section 552.302 of the Government Code provides that if a governmental body fails to comply with section 552.301, the requested information is presumed to be subject to required public disclosure and must be released, unless there is a compelling reason to withhold any of the information. *See id.* § 552.302; *Simmons v. Kuzmich*, 166 S.W.3d 342 (Tex. App.—Fort Worth 2005, no pet.); *Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379, 381 (Tex. App.—Austin 1990, no writ). This statutory presumption can generally be overcome when information is confidential by law or third-party interests are at stake. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 630 at 3 (1994), 325 at 2 (1982).

The medical examiner's office claims section 552.108 of the Government Code, which is a discretionary exception to disclosure that protects a governmental body's interests and does not make information confidential. *See* Gov't Code § 552.007; Open Records Decision Nos. 665 at 2 n.5 (2000) (discretionary exceptions generally), 663 at 5 (1999) (waiver of discretionary exceptions), 177 at 3 (1977) (statutory predecessor to Gov't Code § 552.108 subject to waiver). Nevertheless, the interests under section 552.108 of a governmental body other than the one that failed to comply with section 552.301 can provide a compelling reason for non-disclosure under section 552.302. *See* Open Records Decision No. 586 at 2-3 (1991). In this instance, the Tarrant County District Attorney's Office (the "district attorney's office") asserts a law enforcement interest in the information at issue. Therefore, we will determine whether the medical examiner may withhold the submitted information on behalf of the district attorney's office 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 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 state, and have provided an affidavit from the district attorney's office confirming, release of the submitted information would interfere with a pending criminal prosecution. Based on your representations and the submitted affidavit, we conclude the medical examiner

may withhold the submitted information on behalf of the district attorney's office 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) (court delineates law enforcement interests present in active cases), *writ ref'd n.r.e. per curiam*, 536 S.W.2d 559 (Tex. 1976).

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,



Cindy Nettles
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

CN/dls

Ref: ID# 449510

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)