



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS  
GREG ABBOTT

November 7, 2013

Ms. Cheryl Elliott Thornton  
Assistant County Attorney  
Harris County Attorney's Office  
1019 Congress, 15th Floor  
Houston, Texas 77002

OR2013-19471

Dear Ms. Thornton:

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# 506990 (C.A. File No. 13PIA0487).

The Harris County Sheriff's Office (the "sheriff's office") received a request from an investigator with the Texas Education Agency (the "TEA") for all offense, incident, and investigative reports regarding a named individual, including information pertaining to a specified case number. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.103, and 552.108 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

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 section encompasses information protected by other statutes such as section 58.007 of the Family Code, which provides, in pertinent part, as follows:

(c) Except as provided by Subsection (d), law enforcement records and files concerning a child and information stored, by electronic means or otherwise, concerning the child from which a record or file could be generated may not be disclosed to the public and shall be:

(1) if maintained on paper or microfilm, kept separate from adult files and records;

(2) if maintained electronically in the same computer system as records or files relating to adults, be accessible under controls that are separate and distinct from controls to access electronic data concerning adults; and

(3) maintained on a local basis only and not sent to a central state or federal depository, except as provided by Subchapters B, D, and E.

Fam. Code § 58.007(c). Juvenile law enforcement records relating to delinquent conduct or conduct indicating a need for supervision that occurred on or after September 1, 1997, are confidential under section 58.007. *See id.* § 51.03(a), (b) (defining “delinquent conduct” and “conduct indicating a need for supervision”). For purposes of section 58.007(c), “child” means a person who is ten years of age or older and under seventeen years of age at the time of the conduct at issue. *See id.* § 51.02(2). Section 58.007(c) is not applicable to information that relates to a juvenile as a complainant, victim, witness, or other involved party and not as a suspect or offender. You contend the submitted information is subject to section 58.007(c). The submitted information involves an adult suspect and does not identify a juvenile suspect or offender for the purposes of section 58.007. Accordingly, we find the sheriff’s office has not demonstrated the applicability of section 58.007(c) to the submitted information; thus the sheriff’s office may not withhold it under section 552.101 on this basis.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code also encompasses section 261.201 of the Family Code, which provides, in relevant part:

(a) [T]he following information is confidential, is not subject to public release under [the Act], and may be disclosed only for purposes consistent with this code and applicable federal or state law or under rules adopted by an investigating agency:

(1) a report of alleged or suspected abuse or neglect made under [chapter 261 of the Family Code] and the identity of the person making the report; and

(2) except as otherwise provided in this section, the files, reports, records, communications, audiotapes, videotapes, and working papers used or developed in an investigation under [chapter 261 of the Family Code] or in providing services as a result of an investigation.

*Id.* § 261.201(a). The submitted information pertains to an investigation of alleged or suspected child abuse by the sheriff’s office and, thus, falls within the scope of section 261.201 of the Family Code. *See id.* § 261.001(1)(E) (definition of “abuse” for purposes of chapter 261 of the Family Code includes indecency with child, sexual assault, and aggravated sexual assault under Penal Code sections 21.11, 22.011, and 22.021); *see also* Penal Code §§ 21.11 (defining “child” for purposes of section 21.11 as a minor younger

than 17 years of age), 22.011(c)(1) (defining “child” for purposes of sections 22.011 and 22.021 as “a person younger than 17 years of age”), 22.021(b)(1). As you do not indicate the sheriff’s office has adopted a rule that governs the release of this type of information, we assume that no such regulation exists. Given that assumption, and based on our review, we determine the submitted information is generally confidential pursuant to section 261.201(a) of the Family Code.

Section 261.201(a) provides, however, information encompassed by subsection (a) may be disclosed “for purposes consistent with [the Family Code] and applicable federal or state law.” Fam. Code § 261.201(a). In this instance, section 22.082 of the Education Code constitutes applicable state law. Section 22.082 provides the TEA “may obtain from any law enforcement or criminal justice agency all criminal history record information [(“CHRI”)] and all records contained in any closed criminal investigation file that relate to a specific applicant for or holder of a certificate issued under Subchapter B, Chapter 21 [of the Education Code].” Educ. Code § 22.082. CHRI consists of “information collected about a person by a criminal justice agency that consists of identifiable descriptions and notations of arrests, detentions, indictments, informations, and other formal criminal charges and their dispositions.” Gov’t Code § 411.082(2); *see also id.* §§ 411.0901 (TEA is entitled to obtain CHRI from Texas Department of Public Safety (“DPS”) relating to certain employees of schools), .090 (State Board for Educator Certification (the “SBEC”) is entitled to obtain CHRI from DPS about a person who has applied to SBEC for certificate under subchapter B, chapter 21, Education Code), .087(a)(2) (agency entitled to obtain CHRI from DPS also authorized to “obtain from any other criminal justice agency in this state criminal history record information maintained by that [agency]”); *cf. Brookshire v. Houston Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 508 S.W.2d 675, 678-79 (Tex. Civ. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1974, no writ) (when legislature defines term in one statute and uses same term in relation to same subject matter in later statute, later use of term is same as previously defined).

As previously noted, the requestor is an investigator with the TEA, which has assumed the duties of the SBEC.<sup>1</sup> The requestor states the TEA is conducting an investigation of the named individual who either has applied for or currently holds educator credentials. The requestor seeks access to information relating to a specific case involving the named individual.<sup>2</sup> You inform us the submitted information relates to an open and pending case. Accordingly, the requestor has a right of access under section 22.082 of the Education Code to CHRI regarding the named individual. Although you also seek to withhold such information under sections 552.103 and 552.108 of the Government Code, a specific statutory right of access overcomes general exceptions to disclosure in the Act. *See Open*

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<sup>1</sup>The 79th Texas legislature passed House Bill 1116, which required the transfer of the SBEC’s administrative functions and services to the TEA, effective September 1, 2005.

<sup>2</sup>The requestor also claims a right to the information at issue under sections 261.308 and 261.406 of the Family Code. However, these statutes apply to information held by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services and not the sheriff’s office. *See* Fam. Code §§ 261.308, .406.

Records Decision Nos. 613 at 4 (1993) (exceptions in Act cannot impinge in statutory right of access to information), 451 (1986) (specific statutory right of access provisions overcome general exceptions to disclosure under the Act). Consequently, if the sheriff's office determines release of the CHRI is consistent with the Family Code, the sheriff's office must release information from the submitted documents to this requestor that shows the type of allegations made and whether there was an arrest, information, indictment, detention, conviction, or other formal charges and their dispositions.<sup>3</sup> In that instance, the remainder of the submitted information is confidential under section 261.201(a) of the Family Code and must be withheld under section 552.101 of the Government Code. If, however, the sheriff's office determines release is not consistent with the Family Code, then the submitted information must be withheld in its entirety under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 261.201(a) of the Family Code. *See* Attorney General Opinions DM-353 at 4 n.6 (1995) (finding interagency transfer of information prohibited where confidentiality statute enumerates specific entities to which release of information is authorized and where potential receiving governmental body is not among statute's enumerated entities), JM-590 at 4-5 (1986); *see also* Fam. Code § 261.201(b)-(g), (k), (l) (listing entities authorized to receive Fam. Code § 261.201 information).

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.texasattorneygeneral.gov/open/orl\\_ruling\\_info.shtml](http://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/open/orl_ruling_info.shtml), 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 may be directed to the Office of the Attorney General, toll free, at (888) 672-6787.

Sincerely,



Lindsay E. Hale  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

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<sup>3</sup>As noted, the requestor has a special right of access, beyond that of the general public, to any information being released in this instance. Therefore, if the sheriff's office receives another request for this information from a different requestor, it must again seek a ruling from this office.

Ref: ID# 506990

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor  
(w/o enclosures)