



October 15, 2001

Mr. James L. Hall  
Assistant General Counsel  
Texas Department of Criminal Justice  
P.O. Box 4004  
Huntsville, Texas 77342

OR2001-4656

Dear Mr. Hall:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 153314.

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (the "department") received a request for all investigative files concerning the requestor. You indicate that you have released some responsive information to the requestor. You claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.108, and 552.117 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Section 552.101 excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." Section 261.201(a) of the Family Code provides as follows:

(a) The following information is confidential, is not subject to public release under Chapter 552, Government Code, 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 this chapter and the identity of the person making the report; and

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

Family Code §261.201(a). A portion of the submitted information relates to investigations of child abuse allegations conducted by the Texas Rangers and the Cherokee County Sheriff's Department. We assume that those entities constitute appropriate law enforcement agencies that maintain authority to conduct such investigations. See Family Code §261.301(c) (listing agencies authorized to conduct child abuse investigations). Thus, these investigations are within the scope of section 261.201 of the Family Code. You have not indicated that the department has adopted a rule that governs the release of this type of information. Therefore, we assume that no such regulation exists. Given that assumption, the Texas Rangers report and the Cherokee County Sheriff's Department's report are confidential pursuant to section 261.201 of the Family Code. See Open Records Decision No. 440 at 2 (1986) (predecessor statute). Accordingly, the department must withhold these documents from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code as information made confidential by law. Furthermore, because section 261.201(a) protects all "files, reports, communications, and working papers" related to an investigation of child abuse, the department must not release front page offense report information in cases of alleged child abuse.

Section 552.101 also encompasses the common law right of privacy. *Industrial Found. v. Texas Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668, 683-85 (Tex. 1976), *cert. denied*, 430 U.S. 931 (1977). The doctrine of common law privacy protects information that contains highly intimate or embarrassing facts about a person's private affairs such that its release would be highly objectionable to a reasonable person and the information must be of no legitimate concern to the public. *Id.* In Open Records Decision No. 393 (1983), this office concluded that, generally, only the information which either identifies or tends to identify a victim of sexual assault or other sex-related offense may be withheld under common law privacy. However, because the identifying information in that case was inextricably intertwined with other releasable information, the governmental body was required to withhold the entire report. Open Records Decision No. 393 (1983) at 2; see Open Records Decision No. 339 (1982); see also *Morales v. Ellen*, 840 S.W.2d 519 (Tex. App.--El Paso 1992, writ denied) (identity of witnesses to and victims of sexual harassment was highly intimate or embarrassing information and public did not have a legitimate interest in such information); Open Records Decision No. 440 (1986) (detailed descriptions of serious sexual offenses must be withheld). It appears that the requestor in this case knows the identity of the alleged sexual assault victim. We believe that, in this instance, withholding only the identifying information from the requestor would not preserve the victim's common law right of privacy. Therefore, we conclude that the department must withhold the entire Parole Investigative report pursuant to section 552.101. Because we base our ruling on section 552.101, we need not address your other claimed exceptions.

To summarize, the Texas Rangers report and the Cherokee County Sheriff's Department report are confidential by law, and must be withheld from disclosure under section 552.101. The department must withhold the entire Parole Investigative report pursuant to section 552.101 in conjunction with common law privacy.

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

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at 877/673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Department of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.--Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the General Services Commission at 512/475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,



Cindy Nettles  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

CN/seg

Ref: ID# 153314

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Mr. Kenneth S. Ratliff  
140 Shoreline Drive  
Nacogdoches, Texas 75964  
(w/o enclosures)