



May 23, 2002

Ms. Ashley D. Fourt
Assistant District Attorney
Tarrant County
401 West Belknap
Fort Worth, Texas 76196-0201

OR2002-2777

Dear Ms. Fourt:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 163367.

The Tarrant County Sheriff's Department (the "sheriff") received a written request for all reports, records, documents, photographs, and video footage that may have been obtained during the investigation of a specified incident. You contend that the requested information is exempted from required public disclosure pursuant to sections 552.101 and 552.108 of the Government Code.

We note at the outset that among the records at issue are an individual's medical records. The release of medical records is governed by the Medical Practice Act (the "MPA"), Occ. Code § 151.001 *et. seq.* Section 159.002 of the Occupations Code provides in pertinent part:

- (a) A communication between a physician and a patient, relative to or in connection with any professional services as a physician to the patient, is confidential and privileged and may not be disclosed except as provided by this chapter.
- (b) A record of the identity, diagnosis, evaluation, or treatment of a patient by a physician that is created or maintained by a physician is confidential and privileged and may not be disclosed except as provided by this chapter.
- (c) A person who receives information from a confidential communication or record as described by this chapter, other than a person listed in Section 159.004 who is acting on the patient's behalf, may not disclose the information except to the extent that disclosure is consistent with the authorized purposes for which the information was first obtained.

Occ. Code § 159.002(a)-(c). The MPA also includes provisions that govern the disclosure of information that it encompasses. *See id.* §§ 159.003, .004, .005, .006. This office has

determined that in governing access to a specific subset of information, the MPA prevails over the more general provisions of chapter 552 of the Government Code. *See* Open Records Decision No. 598 (1991). We have marked the medical records that are subject to the MPA. The sheriff may not release these records unless the MPA permits the sheriff to do so.

We now address the remaining submitted records. Section 552.101 excepts from disclosure “information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision.” This section encompasses information protected by other statutes. Section 261.201(a) of the Family Code provides as follows:

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.

The victim of the alleged assault in the investigation was a child for purposes of chapter 261. *See* Fam. Code § 101.003(a) (“child” is generally defined as “a person under 18 years of age who is not and has not been married or who has not had the disabilities of minority removed for general purposes”). After reviewing the information at issue, we thus conclude that the remaining submitted records come within the scope of section 261.201 of the Family Code and may be released only in accordance with that provision. You have not indicated that the sheriff 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 remaining submitted information must be withheld in its entirety pursuant to section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 261.201 of the Family Code.¹ *See* Open Records Decision

¹We note that if the investigation has been referred to the Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (“DPRS”), the requestor, who purports to represent the child and the child’s parent, may be entitled to access DPRS’s records. Section 261.201(g) of the Family Code provides that DPRS, upon request and subject to its own rules:

shall provide to the parent, managing conservator, or other legal representative of a child who is the subject of reported abuse or neglect information concerning the reported abuse or neglect that would otherwise be confidential under this section if the department has edited the information to protect the confidentiality of the identity of the person who made the report and any other person whose life or safety may be endangered by the disclosure.

No. 440 at 2 (1986) (predecessor statute). *But see* Fam. Code § 261.201(b) (provision for court ordered access). Because we resolve your request under section 261.201 of the Family Code, we do not address the applicability of section 552.108 of the Government Code.

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 Texas Building and Procurement 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. We note that a third party may challenge this ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code

§ 552.325. 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,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Michael A. Pearle".

Michael A. Pearle
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

MAP/seg

Ref: ID# 163367

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Mr. Michael Wade
Law Offices of Michael Wade
602 East Belknap Street
Fort Worth, Texas 76102
(w/o enclosures)