



OFFICE *of the* ATTORNEY GENERAL
GREG ABBOTT

July 23, 2003

Mr. Rick Miller
County Attorney
Bell County
P.O. Box 1127
Belton, Texas 76513

OR2003-5080

Dear Mr. Miller:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 184737.

The Bell County Communications Department (the "department") received a request for all documents and statements pertaining to a sexual harassment complaint involving the requestor. You ask whether the requested information is excepted from disclosure under rationale set forth in *Morales v. Ellen*, 840 S.W.2d 519 (Tex. App.—El Paso 1992, writ denied). We have considered your argument 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," including information that is encompassed by the common law right to privacy. See *Industrial Found. v. Texas Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668 (Tex. 1976). In *Morales v. Ellen*, 840 S.W.2d 519 (Tex. App.—El Paso 1992, writ denied), the court applied the common law right to privacy addressed in *Industrial Foundation* to an investigation of allegations of sexual harassment. The investigation files at issue in *Ellen* contained third-party witness statements, an affidavit in which the individual accused of the misconduct responded to the allegations, and the conclusions of the board of inquiry that conducted the investigation. See 840 S.W.2d at 525. The court upheld the release of the affidavit of the person under investigation and the conclusions of the board of inquiry, stating that the disclosure of such documents sufficiently served the public's interest in the matter. *Id.* The court further held, however, that "the public does not possess a legitimate interest in the identities of the individual witnesses, nor the details of their personal statements beyond what is contained in the documents that have been ordered released." *Id.* In accordance with *Ellen*, this office typically has required the

release of a document analogous to the conclusions of the board of inquiry in *Ellen*, but has held that a governmental body must withhold both the identities of victims and witnesses of alleged sexual harassment and any information that would tend to identify such a victim or witness. See Open Records Decision Nos. 393 (1983), 339 (1982). However, when no adequate summary exists, detailed statements regarding the allegations must be released, but the identities of witnesses and victims must still be redacted from the statements.

In this instance, we conclude that the submitted information does not include an adequate summary of the department's investigation. Consequently, the department must release the submitted information in its entirety. In doing so, however, the department must withhold the identities of the victim and witnesses, other than the accused, and information that would tend to identify the victim and witnesses. See *Ellen*, 840 S.W.2d at 525. The identity of the individual accused of sexual harassment is not protected from public disclosure, as common-law privacy does not protect information about a public employee's alleged misconduct on the job or complaints made about the employee's job performance. See Open Records Decision Nos. 438 (1986), 230 (1979), 219 (1978). You must withhold the information that we have marked under section 552.101 in conjunction with common law privacy.

We further note that the submitted information contains an e-mail address of a member of the public, which is excepted from disclosure under section 552.137 of the Government Code. Section 552.137 requires the department to withhold an e-mail address of a member of the public that is provided for the purpose of communicating electronically with a governmental body, unless the member of the public has affirmatively consented to its release. You do not inform us that the member of the public whose e-mail address is at issue has affirmatively consented to the release of the e-mail address contained in the submitted materials. The department must, therefore, withhold e-mail address we have marked under section 552.137 of the Government Code.

In summary, you must withhold the identities of witnesses and victims of sexual harassment, which we have marked, under section 552.101 and *Morales v. Ellen*. You must withhold the e-mail address we have marked under section 552.137. You must release the remaining information to the requestor.

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 Dep't of Pub. 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,



Jennifer E. Berry
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JEB/sdk

Ref: ID# 184737

Enc: Submitted documents

c: Ms. Elizabeth Thomas
Director
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(w/o enclosures)