



OFFICE of the ATTORNEY GENERAL
GREG ABBOTT

December 2, 2003

Mr. J. Greg Hudson
Thomas Hudson & Nelson, L.L.P.
3305 Northland Drive, Suite 301
Austin, Texas 78731

OR2003-8598

Dear Mr. Hudson:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 191939.

The Collin County Sheriff's Department (the "department"), which you represent, received a request for information related to an investigation pertaining to a complaint filed by the requestor. You state that some responsive information has been released to the requestor. You claim that portions of the requested information are excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

We begin by noting that one of the submitted documents was created after the date that the department received the instant request for information. Thus, this document is not responsive to the present request, and this ruling will not address that information. We have marked the nonresponsive document, which the department need not release in response to this request.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." This section encompasses the common-law right of privacy, which excepts from disclosure information that is (1) highly intimate or embarrassing, such that its release would be highly objectionable to a reasonable person and (2) not of legitimate concern to the public. *Indus. Found. v. Texas Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668, 685 (Tex. 1976). In *Morales v.*

Ellen, 840 S.W.2d 519 (Tex. App.—El Paso 1992, writ denied), the court addressed the applicability of the common-law privacy doctrine to files of an investigation into allegations of sexual harassment. The investigation files in *Ellen* contained individual witness statements, an affidavit by the accused individual responding to the allegations, and the conclusions of the board of inquiry that conducted the investigation. *Ellen*, 840 S.W.2d at 525. The court ordered the release of the affidavit of the person under investigation and the conclusions of the board of inquiry, stating that the public's interest was sufficiently served by the disclosure of such documents. *Id.* In concluding, the *Ellen* court held that "the public did 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.*

When there is an adequate summary of the investigation, the summary must be released along with the statement of the accused, but the identities of the victims and witnesses must be redacted and their detailed statements must be withheld from disclosure. 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.

The submitted records contain information that we find to be analogous to the summary released in *Ellen*, as well as the accused's statement. In accordance with the holding in *Ellen*, the department must release the summary and statement, which we have marked. However, in accordance with the common-law privacy principles discussed in *Ellen*, the department must redact the information that we have indicated tends to identify the witnesses before releasing these documents. Under other circumstances, the department also would be required to withhold the victim's identity and statement under section 552.101 in conjunction with common-law privacy. In this instance, however, the requestor was the victim of the alleged sexual harassment, and she therefore has a special right of access to the information that implicates her own privacy interests. See Gov't Code § 552.023; Open Records Decision No. 481 at 4 (1987) (privacy theories not implicated when individual asks governmental body for information concerning herself).¹ Information to which the requestor has a right of access under section 552.023 may not be withheld from her under section 552.101 in conjunction with common-law privacy. All other submitted information, including witness statements, as well as other supporting documentary evidence, must be withheld under section 552.101 of the Government Code in accordance with the common-law privacy concerns expressed in *Ellen*, except as further discussed below.

We note that the documents otherwise marked for release contain information that is excepted from disclosure pursuant to section 552.117 of the Government Code. Section 552.117(a)(2) excepts from disclosure a peace officer's home address, home telephone

¹Section 552.023(a) provides that "[a] person or a person's authorized representative has a special right of access, beyond the right of the general public, to information held by a governmental body that relates to the person and that is protected from public disclosure by laws intended to protect that person's privacy interests."

number, social security number, and information indicating whether the peace officer has family members regardless of whether the peace officer made an election under section 552.024 of the Government Code. Section 552.117(a)(2) applies to peace officers as defined by article 2.12 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. We have marked the information that is protected under section 552.117(a)(2) of the Government Code.

In summary, the department must release the marked summary and statement after redacting the information that we have marked as being excepted from disclosure pursuant to sections 552.101 and 552.117. The remaining submitted information must be withheld in accordance with section 552.101 and the common-law privacy principles discussed in *Ellen*.

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,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kristen Bates".

Kristen A. Bates
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

CN/KAB/jh

Ref: ID#191939

Enc. Submitted documents