



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

October 3, 2005

Mr. Christopher C. Lopez
Assistant General Counsel
Texas Department of State Health Services
1100 West 49th Street
Austin, Texas 78756

OR2005-08942

Dear Mr. Lopez:

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# 233429.

The Texas Department of State Health Services (the "department") received a request for 1) information regarding investigations into complaints of abuse and/or neglect towards patients at a specific facility and 2) any information regarding patient deaths at that facility. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.¹

Initially, we note, and you acknowledge, that the department has not complied with the procedural requirements of section 552.301 of the Governmental Code in requesting this ruling. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(b). Pursuant to section 552.302 of the Government Code, a governmental body's failure to comply with the procedural requirements of section 552.301 results in the legal presumption that the requested information is public and must be released

¹We assume that the sample of records submitted to this office is truly representative of the requested records as a whole. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 499 (1988), 497 (1988). This open records letter does not reach, and therefore does not authorize the withholding of, any other requested records to the extent that those records contain substantially different types of information than that submitted to this office.

unless the governmental body demonstrates a compelling reason to withhold the information from disclosure. *See* Gov't Code § 552.302; *Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379, 381-82 (Tex. App.—Austin 1990, no writ) (governmental body must make compelling demonstration to overcome presumption of openness pursuant to statutory predecessor to section 552.302); Open Records Decision No. 319 (1982). Generally speaking, a compelling reason exists when third party interests are at stake or when information is confidential under other law. Open Records Decision No. 150 (1977). Because section 552.101 can provide a compelling reason to withhold information, we will address your argument concerning this exception.

Section 552.101 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 that is made confidential by statute. You raise section 48.101 of the Human Resources Code, which pertains to the disclosure of reports of abuse, neglect, or exploitation of elderly and disabled persons in certain facilities. Section 48.101 provides, in relevant part, as follows:

(a) The following information is confidential and not subject to disclosure under Chapter 552, Government Code:

(1) a report of abuse, neglect, or exploitation made under this chapter;

(2) the identity of the person making the report; and

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

(b) Confidential information may be disclosed only for a purpose consistent with this chapter and as provided by department or investigating state agency rule and applicable federal law.

Hum. Res. Code § 48.101. The submitted documents consist of files, reports, records, communications, and working papers used or developed in an investigation made under chapter 48 or in providing services as a result of an investigation. We note that such information must not be released to the public, except for a purpose consistent with chapter 48 or as provided by a department or investigating state agency rule or federal law. *See id.* § 48.101(b). *But see id.* § 48.101(c), (d), (e), (f) (permitting release of confidential information in certain circumstances); 25 T.A.C. § 1.207. The department states that none of the exceptions outlined in section 1.207 of title 25 of the Texas Administrative Code are applicable in this instance; therefore, the department must withhold the submitted

information in its entirety pursuant to section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 48.101 of the Human Resources Code. Because our ruling is dispositive, we need not consider your other argument.

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, upon receiving this ruling, the governmental body will either release the public records promptly pursuant to section 552.221(a) of the Government Code or file a lawsuit challenging this ruling pursuant to section 552.324 of the Government Code. If the governmental body fails to do one of these things, 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 Office of the Attorney General 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,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Elizabeth C. Reeder".

Elizabeth C. Reeder
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

ECR/sdk

Ref: ID#233429

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Ms. Jessica Leeder
Texas/Southwest Reporter
The Dallas Morning News
508 Young Street
Dallas, Texas 75202
(w/o enclosures)