



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

March 20, 2006

Ms. Julie Joe
Assistant County Attorney
Travis County Attorney's Office
P.O. Box 1748
Austin, Texas 78767

OR2006-02734

Dear Ms. Joe:

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# 248054.

The Travis County Medical Examiner's Office (the "medical examiner") received four requests for information relating to an autopsy. You claim that the requested information is exempted from disclosure under section 552.108 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and have reviewed the information you submitted.¹

Section 552.108 exempts from disclosure "[i]nformation held by a law enforcement agency or prosecutor that deals with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of crime . . . if . . . release of the information would interfere with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of crime[.]" Gov't Code § 552.108(a)(1). A governmental body that claims an exception to disclosure under section 552.108 must reasonably explain how and why this exception is applicable to the information at issue. *See id.* § 552.301(e)(1)(A); *Ex parte Pruitt*, 551 S.W.2d 706 (Tex. 1977). You inform us that the submitted information relates to an active criminal investigation and that the Austin Police Department and the Travis County District Attorney's Office have objected to release of this information. We note that section 552.108 may be invoked by any proper custodian of information relating to an incident allegedly

¹This letter ruling assumes that the submitted representative sample of information is truly representative of the requested information as a whole. This ruling neither reaches nor authorizes the medical examiner to withhold any information that is substantially different from the submitted information. *See* Gov't Code §§ 552.301(e)(1)(D), .302; Open Records Decision Nos. 499 at 6 (1988), 497 at 4 (1988).

involving criminal conduct that remains under active investigation or prosecution. *See* Open Records Decision No. 372 at 4 (1983) (addressing statutory predecessor). Based on your representations, we conclude that the medical examiner may withhold the submitted information under section 552.108(a)(1) of the Government Code. *See Houston Chronicle Publ'g Co. v. City of Houston*, 531 S.W.2d 177 (Tex. Civ. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1975), *writ ref'd n.r.e. per curiam*, 536 S.W.2d 559 (Tex. 1976) (court delineates law enforcement interests that are present in active cases).

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).

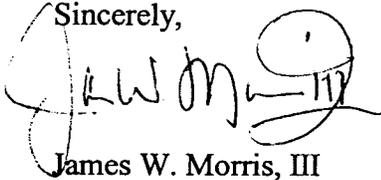
If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, upon receiving this ruling, the governmental body will either release the public records 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 black ink, appearing to read "J.W. Morris, III". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and "M".

James W. Morris, III
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JWM/sdk

Ref: ID# 248054

Enc: Submitted documents

c: Ms. Cyndie Espinosa
News 8 Austin
1708 Colorado Street
Austin, Texas 78701
(w/o enclosures)

Ms. Rebecca Grote
Fox 7 News
119 East 10th Street
Austin, Texas 78701
(w/o enclosures)

Mr. Gerardo Lopez
KXAN-TV
908 West Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard
Austin, Texas 78701
(w/o enclosures)

Ms. Jodie L. Ward-House
Lusk & Evans
806 West Eleventh Street
Austin, Texas 78701
(w/o enclosures)