ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

January 12, 2010

Mr. Robert N. Jones, Jr.
Assistant General Council
Texas Workforce Commission
101 East 15th Street
Austin, Texas 78778-0001

OR2010-00601

Dear Mr. Jones:

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# 367032 (TWC Tracking No. 091019-025).

The Texas Workforce Commission (the "commission") received a request for a copy of the complete investigative file for a specified complaint of employment discrimination. You state the commission has released or will release some of the information. You also state you have redacted information pursuant to the previous determination issued in OR2009-10954 (2009), which authorizes the commission to withhold information that falls within the scope of section 21.207(b) of the Labor Code without the necessity of requesting a decision under the Act. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(a); Open Records Decision No. 673 (2001) (previous determinations). You claim that the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.111, and 552.147 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

You assert the submitted information is subject to the federal Freedom of Information Act ("FOIA"). Section 2000e-5(b) of title 42 of the United States Code states in relevant part the following:

> Whenever a charge is filed by or on behalf of a person claiming to be aggrieved . . . alleging that an employer . . . has engaged in an unlawful employment practice, the [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (the

> "EEOC")] shall serve a notice of the charge . . . on such employer . . ., and shall make an investigation thereof. . . . Charges shall not be made public by the [EEOC]."

42 U.S.C. § 2000e-5(b). The EEOC is authorized by statute to utilize the services of state fair employment practices agencies to assist in meeting its statutory mandate to enforce laws prohibiting discrimination. *See id.* § 2000e-4(g)(1). The commission informs us it has a contract with the EEOC to investigate claims of employment discrimination allegations. The commission asserts that under the terms of this contract, "access to charge and complaint files is governed by FOIA, including the exceptions to disclosure found in the FOIA." The commission claims that because the EEOC would withhold the submitted information under section 552(b)(5) of title 5 of the United States Code, the commission should also withhold this information on this basis. We note, however, FOIA is applicable to information held by an agency of the federal government. *See* 5 U.S.C. § 551(1). The information at issue was created and is maintained by the commission, which is subject to the state laws of Texas. *See* Attorney General Opinion MW-95 (1979) (FOIA exceptions apply to federal agencies, not to state agencies); Open Records Decision Nos. 496 (1988), 124 (1976); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 561 at n.3 (1990) (federal authorities may apply confidentiality principles found in FOIA differently from way in which such principles are applied under Texas open records law); *Davidson v. Georgia*, 622 F.2d 895, 897 (5th Cir. 1980) (state governments are not subject to FOIA). Furthermore, this office has stated in numerous opinions information in the possession of a governmental body of the State of Texas is not confidential or excepted from disclosure merely because the same information is or would be confidential in the hands of a federal agency. *See, e.g.*, Attorney General Opinion MW-95 (1979) (neither FOIA nor federal Privacy Act of 1974 applies to records held by state or local governmental bodies in Texas); Open Records Decision No. 124 (1976) (fact that information held by federal agency is excepted by FOIA does not necessarily mean that same information is excepted under the Act when held by Texas governmental body). You do not cite to any federal law, nor are we aware of any such law, that would pre-empt the applicability of the Act and allow the EEOC to make FOIA applicable to information created and maintained by a state agency. *See* Attorney General Opinion JM-830 (1987) (EEOC lacks authority to require a state agency to ignore state statutes). Thus, you have not shown how the contract between the EEOC and the commission makes FOIA applicable to the commission in this instance. Accordingly, the commission may not withhold the submitted information pursuant to the exceptions available under FOIA.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." Gov't Code § 552.101. This exception encompasses information protected by statutes. Pursuant to section 21.204 of the Labor Code, the commission may investigate a complaint of an unlawful employment practice. *See* Labor Code § 21.204; *see also id.* §§ 21.0015 (powers of Commission on Human Rights under Labor Code chapter 21 transferred to commission's civil rights division), 21.201. Section 21.304 of the Labor Code provides that "[a]n officer

or employee of the commission may not disclose to the public information obtained by the commission under Section 21.204 except as necessary to the conduct of a proceeding under this chapter." *Id.* § 21.304.

You indicate the submitted information pertains to a complaint of unlawful employment practices investigated by the commission under section 21.204 and on behalf of the EEOC. We therefore agree the submitted information is confidential under section 21.304 of the Labor Code. However, as you acknowledge, the requestor is an attorney representing a party to the complaint. Section 21.305 of the Labor Code concerns the release of commission records to a party of a complaint filed under section 21.201 and provides the following:

> (a) The commission shall adopt rules allowing a party to a complaint filed under Section 21.201 reasonable access to commission records relating to the complaint.
>
> (b) Unless the complaint is resolved through a voluntary settlement or conciliation, on the written request of a party the executive director shall allow the party access to the commission records:
>
> > (1) after the final action of the commission; or
> >
> > (2) if a civil action relating to the complaint is filed in federal court alleging a violation of federal law.

Id. § 21.305. In this case, the commission has taken final action, and therefore section 21.305 is applicable. At section 819.92 of title 40 of the Texas Administrative Code, the commission has adopted rules that govern access to its records by a party to a complaint. Section 819.92 provides the following:

> (a) Pursuant to Texas Labor Code § 21.304 and § 21.305, [the commission] shall, on written request of a party to a perfected complaint filed under Texas Labor Code § 21.201, allow the party access to [the commission's] records, unless the perfected complaint has been resolved through a voluntary settlement or conciliation agreement:
>
> > (1) following the final action of [the commission]; or
> >
> > (2) if a party to the perfected complaint or the party's attorney certifies in writing that a civil action relating to the perfected complaint is pending in federal court alleging a violation of federal law.

> (b) Pursuant to the authority granted the [c]ommission in Texas Labor Code § 21.305, reasonable access shall not include access to the following:
>
> > (1) information excepted from required disclosure under Texas Government Code, Chapter 552; or
> >
> > (2) investigator notes.

40 T.A.C. § 819.92. The commission states the "purpose of the rule amendment is to clarify in rule the [c]ommission's determination of what materials are available to the parties in a civil rights matter and what materials are beyond what would constitute reasonable access to the file." 32 Tex. Reg. 553. A governmental body must have statutory authority to promulgate a rule. *See Railroad Comm'n v. ARCO Oil*, 876 S.W.2d 473 (Tex. App.—Austin 1994, writ denied). A governmental body has no authority to adopt a rule that is inconsistent with existing state law. *Id.; see also Edgewood Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Meno*, 917 S.W.2d 717, 750 (Tex. 1995); Attorney General Opinion GA-497 (2006) (in deciding whether governmental body has exceeded its rulemaking powers, determinative factor is whether provisions of rule are in harmony with general objectives of statute at issue).

As noted above, section 21.305 of the Labor Code requires the release of commission complaint records to a party to a complaint under certain circumstances. *See* Labor Code § 21.305. In correspondence to our office, you contend that under section 819.92(b) of the rule, the Act's exceptions apply to withhold information in a commission file, including investigator notes, even when requested by a party to the complaint. *See* 40 T.A.C. § 819.92(b). Section 21.305 of the Labor Code states that the commission "*shall* allow the party access to the commission's records." *See* Labor Code § 21.305 (emphasis added). The commission's rule in subsection 819.92(b) operates as a denial of access to complaint information provided by subsection 819.92(a). *See* 40 T.A.C. § 819.92. Further, the rule conflicts with the mandated party access provided by section 21.305 of the Labor Code. The commission submits no arguments or explanation to resolve this conflict and submits no arguments to support its conclusion that section 21.305's grant of authority to promulgate rules regarding reasonable access permits the commission to deny party access entirely. Being unable to resolve this conflict, we cannot find rule 819.92(b) operates in harmony with the general objectives of section 21.305 of the Labor Code. Thus, we must make our determination under section 21.305 of the Labor Code. *See Edgewood*, 917 S.W.2d at 750.

In this case, as we have previously noted, final agency action has been taken. You do not inform us the complaint was resolved through a voluntary settlement or conciliation agreement. Thus, pursuant to sections 21.305 and 819.92(a), the requestor has a right of access to the commission's records relating to the complaint and the submitted information may not be withheld by the commission under section 552.101 in conjunction with section 819.92(b).

Turning to your section 552.111 claim, we note that this office has long held that information specifically made public by statute may not be withheld from the public under any of the exceptions to public disclosure under the Act. *See e.g.*, Open Records Decision Nos. 544 (1990), 378 (1983), 161 (1977), 146 (1976). You contend, however, the submitted information is excepted under section 552.111 of the Government Code. In support of your contention, you claim, in *Mace v. EEOC*, 37 F. Supp.2d 1144 (E.D. Mo. 1999), a federal court recognized a similar exception by finding that "the EEOC could withhold an investigator's memorandum as predecisional under [FOIA] as part of the deliberative process." In the *Mace* decision, however, there was no access provision analogous to sections 21.305 and 819.92. The court did not have to decide whether the EEOC may withhold the document under section 552(b)(5) of title 5 of the United States Code despite the applicability of an access provision. We therefore conclude the present case is distinguishable from the court's decision in *Mace*. Furthermore, in Open Records Decision No. 534 (1989), this office examined whether the statutory predecessor to section 21.304 of the Labor Code protected from disclosure the Commission on Human Rights' investigative files into discrimination charges filed with the EEOC. We stated, while the statutory predecessor to section 21.304 of the Labor Code made all information collected or created by the Commission on Human Rights during its investigation of a complaint confidential, "[t]his does not mean, however, that the commission is authorized to withhold the information from the parties subject to the investigation." *See* Open Records Decision No. 534 at 7 (1989). Therefore, we concluded the release provision grants a special right of access to a party to a complaint. Thus, because access to the commission's records created under section 21.201 are governed by sections 21.305 and 819.92, we determine the submitted information may not be withheld by the commission under section 552.111 of the Government Code.

Next we address your argument concerning the submitted W-4 form. Section 552.101 also encompasses section 6103(a) of title 26 of the United States Code. Prior decisions of this office have held that this section renders tax return information confidential. *See* Attorney General Opinion H-1274 (1978) (tax returns); Open Records Decision Nos. 600 (1992) (W-4 forms), 226 (1979) (W-2 forms). Tax return information includes certain data furnished to or collected by the Internal Revenue Service with respect to the determination of possible existence of liability of any person under title 26 of the United States Code for any tax. *See* 26 U.S.C. § 6103(b). Federal courts have construed the term "return information" expansively to include any information gathered by the Internal Revenue Service regarding a taxpayer's liability under title 26 of the United States Code. *See Mallas v. Kolak*, 721 F. Supp 748, 754 (M.D.N.C. 1989), aff'd in part, 993 F.2d 1111 (4th Cir. 1993). Thus, the submitted W-4 form constitutes tax return information that must generally be withheld under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with federal law. However, in this instance, the requestor has a right of access to the submitted information under section 21.305 of the Labor Code. As a federal law, section 6103(a) preempts any conflicting state provisions, including section 21.305 of the Labor Code. *See Equal Employment Opportunity Comm'n v. City of Orange*, Tex., 905 F. Supp. 381, 382 (E.D.

Tex. 1995) (federal law prevails over inconsistent provision of state law). Accordingly we find that, notwithstanding section 21.305, the submitted W-4 form is confidential pursuant to section 6103(a) of title 26 of the United States Code, and must be withheld under section 552.101 of the Government Code.[1]

Section 552.101 also encompasses the Medical Practice Act (the "MPA"), subtitle B of title 3 of the Occupations Code. Section 159.002 of the MPA provides in part the following:

> (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(b), (c). Information subject to the MPA includes both medical records and information obtained from those medical records. *See id.* §§ 159.002, .004; Open Records Decision No. 598 (1991). We also have concluded that when a file is created as the result of a hospital stay, all of the documents in the file that relate to diagnosis and treatment constitute either physician-patient communications or records of the identity, diagnosis, evaluation, or treatment of a patient by a physician that are created or maintained by a physician. *See* Open Records Decision No. 546 (1990). Medical records are generally confidential, and may only be released as provided under the MPA. ORD 598. Thus, because the medical records within the submitted information fall under both the MPA and section 21.305 of the Labor Code, and because the release provisions of these sections are in conflict, we must determine which statute governs access to these records. Where general and specific statutes are in irreconcilable conflict, the specific provision typically prevails as an exception to the general provision unless the general provision was enacted later and there is clear evidence that the legislature intended the general provision to prevail. *See* Gov't Code § 311.026(b); *City of Lake Dallas v. Lake Cities Mun. Util. Auth.*, 555 S.W.2d 163, 168 (Tex. Civ. App.—Fort Worth 1977, writ ref'd n.r.e.). Section 21.305 generally applies to any type of record contained in commission complaint records. However, the MPA is more specific because it is only applicable to medical records. Accordingly, we conclude that, notwithstanding the applicability of section 21.305, the

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[1] We note this office recently issued Open Records Decision No. 684 (2009), a previous determination to all governmental bodies authorizing them to withhold ten categories of information, including W-4 forms under section 552.101 in conjunction with section 6103(a) of title 26 of the United States Code, without the necessity of requesting an attorney general decision.

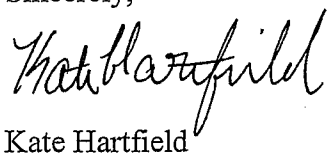
information you have marked constitutes medical records that may only be released in accordance with the MPA.

In summary, the commission must withhold the W-4 form you have marked under section 552.101 in conjunction with section 6103(a) of title 26 of the United States Code, and the medical records you have marked under section 552.101 in conjunction with the MPA.[2] The remaining information must be released.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular information 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 information or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For more information concerning those rights and responsibilities, please visit our website at http://www.oag.state.tx.us/open/index_orl.php, or call the Office of the Attorney General's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. Questions concerning the allowable charges for providing public information under the Act must be directed to the Cost Rules Administrator of the Office of the Attorney General, toll free at (888) 672-6787.

Sincerely,



Kate Hartfield
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

KH/dls

Ref: ID# 367032

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)

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[2]As our ruling is dispositive, we need not address your remaining arguments against disclosure.