



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS  
GREG ABBOTT

June 28, 2011

Ms. Margo M. Kaiser  
Staff Attorney  
Texas Workforce Commission  
101 East 15th Street  
Austin, Texas 78778-0001

OR2011-09161

Dear Ms. Kaiser:

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# 421996 (TWC Tracking Nos. 110408-049 and 110408-151).

The Texas Workforce Commission (the "commission") received a request for information related to eight named individuals. You state the commission will withhold any mediation and conciliation information under section 21.207(b) of the Labor Code pursuant to the previous determination issued to the commission in Open Records Letter No. 2009-10954 (2009). *See Gov't Code* § 552.301(a); Open Records Decision No. 673 at 7-8 (2001). You claim portions of the submitted information are excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.102, and 552.137 of the Government Code.<sup>1</sup> We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted representative sample of information.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>You also state you will redact information pursuant to section 552.147 of the Government Code, which authorizes a governmental body to redact a living person's social security number from public release without the necessity of requesting a decision from this office. *See Gov't Code* § 552.147(b). However, we note the submitted information does not contain any social security numbers. Therefore, section 552.147 is not applicable to this information.

<sup>2</sup>We assume that the "representative 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.

First, we must address the commission's obligations under section 552.301 of the Government Code, which prescribes the procedures that a governmental body must follow in asking this office to decide whether requested information is excepted from public disclosure. Pursuant to section 552.301(e), within fifteen days of receiving the request, the governmental body must submit to this office (1) general written comments stating the reasons why the stated exceptions apply that would allow the information to be withheld, (2) a copy of the written request for information, (3) a signed statement or sufficient evidence showing the date the governmental body received the written request, and (4) a copy of the specific information requested or representative samples, labeled to indicate which exceptions apply to which parts of the documents. Gov't Code § 552.301(e). You inform us the commission received the request for information on April 8, 2011. You inform us the commission observed a skeleton crew day on April 21, 2011. Therefore, the commission was required to submit written comments and the information at issue by May 2, 2011. However, you did not submit written comments or the information at issue until May 3, 2011. Consequently, we find the commission failed to comply with the requirements of section 552.301.

Pursuant to section 552.302 of the Government Code, a governmental body's failure to comply with the procedural requirements of the Act results in the legal presumption that the requested information is public and must be released unless the governmental body demonstrates a compelling reason to withhold the information from disclosure. *See id.* § 552.302; *Simmons v. Kuzmich*, 166 S.W.3d 342, 350 (Tex. App.—Fort Worth 2005, no pet.); *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). The presumption that information is public under section 552.302 can be overcome by demonstrating that the information is confidential by law or third-party interests are at stake. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 630 at 3 (1994), 325 at 2 (1982). Because sections 552.101, 552.102, and 552.137 of the Government Code can provide compelling reasons to withhold information, we will consider whether or not any of the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under these sections.

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 other statutes make confidential. 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); .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.

The submitted information pertains to complaints of unlawful discrimination that were investigated by the commission under section 21.204 and on behalf of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Thus, the information at issue is confidential under section 21.304 of the Labor Code. However, in this instance, the requestor's client is a party to the complaints. Section 21.305 of the Labor Code addresses the release of commission records to a party to a complaint filed under section 21.201 of the Labor Code and provides as follows:

(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, you state the commission has taken final action; 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 as follows:

(a) Pursuant to Texas Labor Code § 21.304 and § 21.305, [the commission] shall, on written request of a party to a perfected complaint 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. 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. 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. 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. Being unable to resolve this conflict, we cannot find that 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, final agency action has been taken. You do not inform us the complaints were resolved through a voluntary settlement or conciliation agreement. Thus, pursuant to section 21.305 of the Labor Code and section 819.92(a) of title 40 of the Texas Administrative Code, the requestor has a right of access to the commission's records relating to the complaints.

You assert portions of the submitted information are excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common-law privacy and section 552.102 of the Government Code. Further, you state you will redact information under section 552.137 of the Government Code pursuant to Open Records Decision No. 684 (2009).<sup>3</sup> However, sections 552.102 and 552.137 are general exceptions to disclosure under the Act and a specific statutory right of access prevails over general exceptions to disclosure under the Act. *See Collins v. Tex Mall, L.P.*, 297 S.W.3d 409, 415 (Tex. App.—Fort Worth 2009, no pet.) (statutory provision controls and preempts common law only when statute directly conflicts with common-law principle); *CenterPoint Energy Houston Elec. LLC v. Harris County Toll Rd.*, 436 F.3d 541, 544 (5th Cir. 2006) (common law controls

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<sup>3</sup>We note this office issued Open Records Decision No. 684, a previous determination to all governmental bodies authorizing them to withhold ten categories of information, including an e-mail address of a member of the public under section 552.137 of the Government Code, without the necessity of requesting an attorney general decision.

only where there is no conflicting or controlling statutory law); *see also* Open Records Decision Nos. 613 at 4 (1993) (exceptions in Act cannot impinge on statutory right of access to information), 451 at 4 (1986) (specific statutory right of access provisions overcome general exceptions to disclosure under the Act). Because the requestor, in this instance, has a statutory right of access to the requested information, the commission may not withhold the information you have marked under section 552.101 in conjunction with common-law privacy and section 552.102. Further, the commission may not redact any information under section 552.137. As no further exceptions to disclosure have been raised, the submitted information must be released to this requestor.<sup>4</sup>

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](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,



Sarah Casterline  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

SEC/eb

Ref: ID# 421996

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor  
(w/o enclosures)

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<sup>4</sup>The requestor has a special right of access to the submitted information. If the commission receives another request for this particular information from a different requestor, then the commission should again seek a decision from this office.