



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

September 2, 2015

Mr. Frank E. Pérez
Counsel for Texas Southmost College District
Frank E. Pérez & Associates, P.C.
P.O. Box 3490
Brownsville, Texas 78523-3490

OR2015-18387

Dear Mr. Pérez:

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# 577940 (File# 43306).

The Texas Southmost College District (the "district"), which you represent, received a request for a specified sexual harassment investigation involving the requestor. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.103, and 552.111 of the Government Code and privileged under Texas Rules of Civil Procedure 192.5. We have considered the district's arguments and reviewed the submitted information.

The United States Department of Education Family Policy Compliance Office has informed this office that the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ("FERPA"), section 1232g of title 20 of the United States Code, does not permit state and local educational authorities to disclose to this office, without parental consent, unredacted, personally identifiable information contained in education records for the purpose of our review in the open records ruling process under the Act.¹ Consequently, state and local educational authorities that receive a request for education records from a member of the public under the Act must not submit education records to this office in unredacted form, that is, in a form in which "personally identifiable information" is disclosed. *See* 34 C.F.R. § 99.3 (defining

¹A copy of this letter may be found on the Office of the Attorney General's website: http://www.oag.state.tx.us/opinopen/og_resources.shtml.

“personally identifiable information”). The district has submitted, among other things, unredacted education records for our review. Because our office is prohibited from reviewing these education records to determine whether appropriate redactions under FERPA have been made, we will not address the applicability of FERPA to any of the submitted records. Such determinations under FERPA must be made by the educational authority in possession of the education records.

Next, we note the submitted information is a completed investigation subject to section 552.022(a)(1) of the Government Code. Section 552.022(a)(1) provides:

(a) Without limiting the amount or kind of information that is public information under this chapter, the following categories of information are public information and not excepted from required disclosure unless made confidential under this chapter or other law:

(1) a completed report, audit, evaluation, or investigation made of, for, or by a governmental body, except as provided by Section 552.108[.]

Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(1). Although you seek to withhold the submitted information under sections 552.103 and 552.111 of the Government Code, these sections are discretionary exceptions to disclosure and do not make information confidential under the Act. *See Dallas Area Rapid Transit v. Dallas Morning News*, 4 S.W.3d 469, 475-76 (Tex. App.—Dallas 1999, orig. proceeding) (governmental body may waive section 552.103); *see also* Open Records Decision Nos. 677 at 8 (2002) (attorney work product privilege under section 552.111 may be waived), 665 at 2 n.5 (2000) (discretionary exceptions generally), 663 at 5 (1999) (waiver of discretionary exceptions). Accordingly, the district may not withhold the submitted information pursuant to section 552.103 or section 552.111 of the Government Code. However, the Texas Supreme Court has held “other law,” such as the Texas Rules of Civil Procedure, makes information confidential for purposes of section 552.022(a). *In re City of Georgetown*, 53 S.W.3d 328 (Tex. 2001). Accordingly, we will consider the district’s attorney work product argument for the submitted information under rule 192.5 of the Texas Rules of Civil Procedure. Furthermore, as section 552.101 of the Government Code makes information confidential under the Act, we will consider the district’s claims under section 552.101 for the information.

Rule 192.5 of the Texas Rules of Civil Procedure encompasses the attorney work-product privilege. For purposes of section 552.022 of the Government Code, information is confidential under rule 192.5 only to the extent it implicates the core work product aspect of the work product privilege. *See* ORD 677 at 9-10. Rule 192.5 defines core work product as the work product of an attorney or an attorney’s representative, developed in anticipation of litigation or for trial, that contains the mental impressions, opinions, conclusions, or legal theories of the attorney or the attorney’s representative. *See* TEX. R. CIV. P. 192.5(a), (b)(1). Accordingly, in order to withhold attorney core work product from disclosure under

rule 192.5, a governmental body must demonstrate the material was (1) created for trial or in anticipation of litigation and (2) consists of the mental impressions, opinions, conclusions, or legal theories of an attorney or an attorney's representative. *Id.*

The first prong of the work product test, which requires a governmental body to show that the information at issue was created in anticipation of litigation, has two parts. A governmental body must demonstrate (1) a reasonable person would have concluded from the totality of the circumstances surrounding the investigation that there was a substantial chance that litigation would ensue, and (2) the party resisting discovery believed in good faith that there was a substantial chance that litigation would ensue and conducted the investigation for the purpose of preparing for such litigation. *See Nat'l Tank v. Brotherton*, 851 S.W.2d 193, 207 (Tex. 1993). A "substantial chance" of litigation does not mean a statistical probability, but rather "that litigation is more than merely an abstract possibility or unwarranted fear." *Id.* at 204. The second part of the work product test requires the governmental body to show the materials at issue contain the mental impressions, opinions, conclusions, or legal theories of an attorney's or an attorney's representative. *See TEX. R. CIV. P. 192.5(b)(1)*. A document containing core work product information that meets both parts of the work product test is confidential under rule 192.5, provided the information does not fall within the scope of the exceptions to the privilege enumerated in rule 192.5(c). *See Pittsburgh Corning Corp. v. Caldwell*, 861 S.W.2d 423, 427 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1993, orig. proceeding).

The district claims the submitted information is privileged under Texas Rule of Civil Procedure 192.5. You explain this information pertains to a sexual harassment investigation that was conducted because the district's employment policies require such an investigation be conducted when a sexual harassment complaint is made to the district. However, you have failed to explain how the information was created for trial or in anticipation of litigation. Thus, we find the district has failed to demonstrate the information at issue is protected core work product. Accordingly, the district may not withhold the submitted information under Texas Rule of Civil Procedure 192.5.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." Gov't Code § 552.101. Section 552.101 encompasses the doctrine of common-law privacy, which protects information if it (1) contains highly intimate or embarrassing facts, the publication of which would be highly objectionable to a reasonable person, and (2) is not of legitimate concern to the public. *Indus. Found. v. Tex. Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668, 685 (Tex. 1976). To demonstrate the applicability of common-law privacy, both prongs of this test must be established. *Id.* at 681-82.

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 of allegations of sexual harassment in an employment context. The investigation files in *Ellen* contained individual witness statements, an affidavit by the individual accused of the

misconduct responding to the allegations, and 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.*

Thus, if there is an adequate summary of an investigation of alleged sexual harassment, the investigation summary must be released under *Ellen*, along with the statement of the accused, but the identities of the victims and witnesses of the alleged sexual harassment must be redacted, and their detailed statements must be withheld from disclosure. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 393 (1983), 339 (1982). If no adequate summary of the investigation exists, then all of the information relating to the investigation ordinarily must be released, with the exception of information that would identify the victims and witnesses. We note that because common-law privacy does not protect information about a public employee's alleged misconduct on the job or complaints made about a public employee's job performance, the identity of the individual accused of sexual harassment is not protected from public disclosure. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 438 (1986), 405 (1983), 230 (1979), 219 (1978). We note supervisors are generally not witnesses for purposes of *Ellen*, except where their statements appear in a non-supervisory context.

In this instance, the submitted information pertains to a sexual harassment investigation and thus, is subject to the ruling in *Ellen*. Upon review, we find the submitted information includes an adequate summary of the investigation, as well as a statement by the person accused of sexual harassment. The adequate summary and statement of the accused are not confidential under section 552.101 in conjunction with common-law privacy. *See Ellen*, 840 S.W.2d at 525. Therefore, with the exception of the adequate summary and the statement of the accused, the district must withhold the remaining information under section 552.101 in conjunction with common-law privacy and the holding in *Ellen*. We note, however, information within the adequate summary and statement of the accused that identifies the victim and witnesses is confidential under common-law privacy. *See id.* Therefore, the district must withhold the information that identifies the victim and witnesses, which we have marked, within the adequate summary and statement of the accused under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common-law privacy and the holding in *Ellen*. In this instance, the requestor is the accused. Section 552.023 of the Government Code states a person has a special right of access to information that relates to the person and that is protected from disclosure by laws intended to protect the person's privacy interest. *See* Gov't Code § 552.023(a); Open Records Decision No. 481 at 4 (1987) (governmental body may not deny access to whom information relates or person's authorized representative on grounds that information is considered confidential by privacy principles). Thus, this requestor has a special right of access to his own information, and the district may not withhold this requestor's respective information from him under section 552.101 on the basis of common-law privacy.

The district also asserts the doctrine of constitutional privacy in conjunction with section 552.101 of the Government Code. Constitutional privacy consists of two interrelated types of privacy: 1) the right to make certain kinds of decisions independently and 2) an individual's interest in avoiding disclosure of personal matters. Open Records Decision No. 455 at 4 (1987). The first type protects an individual's autonomy within "zones of privacy" which include matters related to marriage, procreation, contraception, family relationships, and child rearing and education. *Id.* The second type of constitutional privacy requires a balancing between the individual's privacy interests and the public's need to know information of public concern. *Id.* The scope of information protected is narrower than that under the common law doctrine of privacy: the information must concern the "most intimate aspects of human affairs." *Id.* at 5 (citing *Ramie v. City of Hedwig Village, Tex.*, 765 F.2d 490 (5th Cir. 1985)). Upon review, we find the district failed to demonstrate any individual's privacy interest in the investigation summary or accused's statement outweighs the public's interest in this instance. Therefore, the district may not withhold any of the remaining information on the basis of constitutional privacy.

We note the remaining information in the summary and the accused's statement contains information that is subject to section 552.117 of the Government Code.² Section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code applies to records a governmental body holds in an employment capacity and excepts from disclosure the home addresses and telephone numbers, emergency contact information, social security numbers, and family member information of current or former officials or employees of a governmental body who request that this information be kept confidential under section 552.024 of the Government Code. Gov't Code § 552.117(a)(1). Whether a particular piece of information is protected by section 552.117(a)(1) must be determined at the time the request for it is made. *See* Open Records Decision No. 530 at 5 (1989). Thus, information may be withheld under section 552.117(a)(1) only on behalf of a current or former employee or official who made a request for confidentiality under section 552.024 prior to the date of the governmental body's receipt of the request for the information. In this instance, we note section 552.117 protects personal privacy. Therefore, the requestor whose information is at issue has a right of access to his own information under section 552.023 of the Government Code. *See* Gov't Code § 552.023. However, if the remaining employee whose information is at issue timely elected confidentiality under section 552.024, the district must withhold the information we have marked under section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code. If the employee whose information is at issue did not make a timely election under section 552.024, this information may not be withheld under section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code.

In summary, with the exception of the adequate summary of the investigation and the statement of the accused, which we have marked, the district must withhold the submitted information under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with

²The Office of the Attorney General will raise a mandatory exception on behalf of a governmental body, but ordinarily will not raise other exceptions. Open Records Decision Nos. 481 (1987), 480 (1987), 470 (1987).

common-law privacy and the holding in *Ellen*. In releasing the adequate summary and the statement of the accused, the district must withhold the information that identifies the victim and witnesses we have marked under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common-law privacy and the holding in *Ellen*. To the extent the employee whose information is at issue timely requested confidentiality under section 552.024 of the Government Code, the district must also withhold the information we have marked in the summary and the accused's statement under section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code.³

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.texasattorneygeneral.gov/open/orl_ruling_info.shtml, 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 may be directed to the Office of the Attorney General, toll free, at (888) 672-6787.

Sincerely,



Ramsey A. Abarca
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

RAA/dls

Ref: ID# 577940

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)

³We note the requestor has a special right of access to some of the information being released. Gov't Code § 552.023. Accordingly, if the district receives another request for this same information from a different requestor, the governmental body must again seek a ruling from this office.