



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

May 19, 2016

Mr. Daniel W. Ray
Ms. Abigail K. Sullivan
Counsel for Hunt County
Scott, Ray & Sullivan PLLC
P.O. Box 1353
Greenville, Texas 75403-1353

OR2016-11551

Dear Mr. Ray and Ms. Sullivan:

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# 613242.

The Hunt County Sheriff's Office (the "sheriff's office"), which you represent, received a request for all records pertaining to the requestor's client. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.103, and 552.108 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Initially, we note some of the requested information was the subject of a previous request for information, in response to which this office issued Open Records Letter No. 2015-25025 (2015). In that ruling, we determined (1) the sheriff's office must release the requestor's client's fingerprints to the requestor pursuant to section 560.002 of the Government Code; and (2) if the sheriff's office determines release of the criminal history record information ("CHRI") is consistent with the Family Code and relates to a criminal case in which the requestor is appointed, then the sheriff's office must release the information that shows the type of allegations made and whether there was an arrest, information, indictment, detention, conviction, or other formal charges and their dispositions and withhold the remaining information under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 261.201(a) of the Family Code, but if the sheriff's office determines release of the

CHRI is not consistent with the Family Code or does not relate to a criminal case in which the requestor is appointed, then the sheriff's office must withhold the remaining information in its entirety under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 261.201(a) of the Family Code. We have no indication the law, facts, or circumstances on which the prior ruling was based have changed. Accordingly, the sheriff's office must continue to rely on Open Records Letter No. 2015-25025 as a previous determination and withhold or release the identical information in accordance with that ruling. *See* Open Records Decision No. 673 at 6-7 (2001) (discussing criteria for first type of previous determination). We will consider your arguments against release of the requested information that is not encompassed by Open Records Letter No. 2015-25025.

Next, we note the submitted information includes court-filed documents that are subject to section 552.022 of the Government Code. Section 552.022(a)(17) provides for the required public disclosure of "information that is also contained in a public court record" unless it is "made confidential under [the Act] or other law[.]" Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(17). Although you raise sections 552.103 and 552.108 of the Government Code for this information, these exceptions are discretionary and do not make information confidential under the Act. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 665 at 2 n.5 (2000) (discretionary exceptions generally), 663 at 5 (1999) (waiver of discretionary exceptions), 542 at 4 (1990) (statutory predecessor to section 552.103 may be waived), 177 at 3 (1977) (statutory predecessor to section 552.108 subject to waiver). As a result, sections 552.103 and 552.108 do not make information confidential for the purposes of section 552.022. Therefore, the sheriff's office may not withhold the court-filed documents under section 552.103 or section 552.108. However, you also raise section 552.101 of the Government Code, which can make information confidential under the Act. Thus, we will consider the applicability of this exception to the information subject to section 552.022, as well as the remaining information. Additionally, we will consider your arguments under sections 552.103 and 552.108 for the information not subject to section 552.022.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from public disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." Gov't Code § 552.101. This section encompasses section 261.201 of the Family Code, which provides, in relevant part:

(a) [T]he following information is confidential, is not subject to public release under [the Act], and may be disclosed only for purposes consistent with this code and applicable federal or state law or under rules adopted by an investigating agency:

(1) a report of alleged or suspected abuse or neglect made under [chapter 261 of the Family Code] and the identity of the person making the report; and

(2) except as otherwise provided in this section, the files, reports, records, communications, audiotapes, videotapes, and working papers used or developed in an investigation under [chapter 261 of the Family Code] or in providing services as a result of an investigation.

Fam. Code § 261.201(a). Upon review, we find the submitted information pertains to an investigation of alleged or suspected child abuse and, thus, falls within the scope of section 261.201 of the Family Code. *See id.* §§ 101.003(a) (defining “child” for the purposes of this section as a person under 18 years of age who is not and has not been married or who has not had the disabilities of minority removed for general purposes), 261.001(1) (defining “abuse” for purposes of chapter 261 of the Family Code). Because the sheriff’s office does not indicate it has adopted a rule that governs the release of this type of information, we assume no such regulation exists. Thus, the information is generally confidential pursuant to section 261.201 of the Family Code.

However, section 261.201(a) provides information encompassed by subsection (a) may be disclosed “for purposes consistent with [the Family Code] and applicable federal or state law.” *Id.* § 261.201(a). We note the requestor is a representative of the Regional Public Defender for Capital Cases. Section 411.1272 of the Government Code provides:

The office of capital and forensic writs and a public defender’s office are entitled to obtain from the [Department of Public Safety] criminal history record information maintained by the [Department of Public Safety] that relates to a criminal case in which an attorney compensated . . . by the public defender’s office has been appointed.

Gov’t Code § 411.1272. “Public defender’s office” has the meaning assigned by article 26.044(a) of the Code of Criminal Procedure. *Id.* § 411.082(6); *see also* Crim. Proc. Code art. 26.044(a)(4). In addition, section 411.087(a) of the Government Code provides:

(a) Unless otherwise authorized by Subsection (e), a person, agency, department, political subdivision, or other entity that is authorized by this subchapter or Subchapter E-1 to obtain from the [Department of Public Safety] criminal history record information maintained by the [Department of Public Safety] that relates to another person is authorized to:

...

(2) obtain from any other criminal justice agency in this state criminal history record information maintained by that criminal justice agency that relates to that person.

Gov't Code § 411.087(a)(2). "Criminal history record information" ("CHRI") is defined as "information collected about a person by a criminal justice agency that consists of identifiable descriptions and notations of arrests, detentions, indictments, informations, and other formal criminal charges and their dispositions." *See id.* § 411.082(2).

Accordingly, the requestor is authorized to obtain the CHRI in the submitted information from the sheriff's office pursuant to sections 411.087(a)(2) and 411.1272 of the Government Code if it relates to a criminal case in which the requestor is appointed. *See id.* §§ 411.087(a)(2), .1272. Furthermore, as noted above, section 261.201(a) states any release must be "for purposes consistent with the Family Code." *See Fam. Code* § 261.201(a). This office cannot determine whether the release of the information is consistent with the Family Code. Therefore, if the sheriff's office determines release of the CHRI is consistent with the Family Code and relates to a criminal case in which the requestor is appointed, then the sheriff's office must release the information that shows the type of allegations made and whether there was an arrest, information, indictment, detention, conviction, or other formal charges and their dispositions. In this instance, the sheriff's office must withhold the remaining information under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 261.201(a) of the Family Code. However, if the sheriff's office determines release of the CHRI is not consistent with the Family Code or does not relate to a criminal case in which the requestor is appointed, then the sheriff's office must withhold the submitted information in its entirety under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 261.201(a) of the Family Code. Although the sheriff's office seeks to withhold the CHRI under sections 552.103 and 552.108 of the Government Code, a specific statutory right of access overcomes general exceptions to disclosure in the Act. *See Open Records Decision Nos. 623 at 3 (1994) (exceptions in the Act generally inapplicable to information that statutes expressly make public), 613 at 4 (1993) (exceptions in Act cannot impinge in statutory right of access to information), 451 (1986) (specific statutory right of access provisions overcome general exceptions to disclosure under the Act).*

In summary, the sheriff's office must continue to rely on Open Records Letter No. 2015-25025 as a previous determination and withhold or release the identical information in accordance with that ruling. If the sheriff's office determines release of the CHRI is consistent with the Family Code and relates to a criminal case in which the requestor is appointed, then the sheriff's office must release the information that shows the type of allegations made and whether there was an arrest, information, indictment, detention, conviction, or other formal charges and their dispositions and withhold the remaining information under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 261.201(a) of the Family Code. If the sheriff's office determines release of the CHRI is not consistent with the Family Code or does not relate to a criminal case in which the requestor is appointed, then the sheriff's office must withhold the submitted information in

its entirety under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 261.201(a) of the Family Code.¹

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,



Brian E. Berger
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

BB/akg

Ref: ID# 613242

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)

¹We note the requestor has a special right of access to the information being released. Accordingly, if the sheriff's office receives another request for this information from a different requestor, it must again seek a ruling from this office.