



September 17, 2002

Ms. Mary E. Reveles
Assistant County Attorney
Fort Bend County
301 Jackson, Suite 621
Richmond, Texas 77469-3108

OR2002-5203

Dear Ms. Reveles:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 168732.

The Fort Bend County Sheriff's Office (the "sheriff") received a request for a named employee's employment application. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.108, 552.117, and 552.130 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

You claim that the requested employment file is excepted from public disclosure under section 552.108 of the Government Code. Section 552.108 provides as follows:

(a) Information held by a law enforcement agency or prosecutor that deals with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of crime is excepted from the requirements of Section 552.021 if:

(1) release of the information would interfere with the detection, investigation or prosecution of crime; [or]

(2) it is information that deals with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of crime only in relation to an

investigation that did not result in conviction or deferred adjudication[.]

(b) An internal records or notation of a law enforcement agency or prosecutor that is maintained for internal use in matters relating to law enforcement or prosecution is excepted from the requirements of Section 552.021 if:

(1) release of the internal record or notation would interfere with law enforcement or prosecution; or

(2) the internal record or notation relates to law enforcement only in relation to an investigation that did not result in conviction or deferred adjudication[.]

Gov't Code § 552.108(a)(1)-(2), (b)(1)-(2). Generally, a governmental body claiming section 552.108(a)(1) or (b)(1) must reasonably explain, if the information does not supply the explanation on its face, how and why the release of the requested information would interfere with law enforcement. *See* Gov't Code §§ 552.108(a)(1), (b)(1), .301(e)(1)(a); *see also Ex parte Pruitt*, 551 S.W.2d 706 (Tex. 1977). On the other hand, a governmental body claiming section 552.108(a)(2) or (b)(2) must demonstrate that the requested information relates to a criminal investigation that has concluded in a final result other than a conviction or deferred adjudication. First, you have not stated that the requested information pertains to an ongoing criminal investigation or prosecution. Additionally, while you state that "the release of [the employee's] complete personal history could interfere with the detection, investigation or prosecution of a crime," you have failed to explain how the release of this information would interfere in some way with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of crime. *See* Gov't Code § 552.108(a)(1), (b)(1). Thus, you have not met your burden under section 552.108(a)(1) or (b)(1). Furthermore, you have failed to demonstrate that the requested information relates to a criminal investigation that has concluded in a final result other than a conviction or deferred adjudication. *See* Gov't Code § 552.108(a)(2), (b)(2). Thus, you have not met your burden under section 552.108(a)(2) or (b)(2). Therefore, section 552.108 is not applicable.

Section 552.101 excepts "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." Section 552.101 also encompasses the doctrine of common-law privacy. Common-law privacy protects information if (1) the information contains highly intimate or embarrassing facts the publication of which would be highly objectionable to a reasonable person, and (2) the information is not of legitimate concern to the public. *Industrial Found. v. Texas Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668, 685 (Tex. 1976), *cert. denied*, 430 U.S. 931 (1977). The type of information considered intimate and embarrassing by the Texas Supreme Court in *Industrial Foundation* included information relating to sexual assault, pregnancy, mental or physical abuse in the workplace, illegitimate children, psychiatric treatment of mental disorders, attempted suicide, and injuries to sexual organs. 540 S.W.2d at 683.

You argue that release of the "Personal History Statement" of the named employee will invade her privacy, and "could be used against [the employee] by various suspects and compromise her ability to perform her duties." This office has held that information may be withheld from disclosure under section 552.101 in conjunction with the common-law right to privacy upon a showing of certain "special circumstances." *See* Open Records Decision No. 169 (1977). This office considers "special circumstances" to refer to a very narrow set of situations in which the release of information would likely cause someone to face "an imminent threat of physical danger." *Id.* at 6. Such "special circumstances" do not include "a generalized and speculative fear of harassment or retribution." *Id.* In this case we find that you have not demonstrated an imminent physical danger that would constitute such "special circumstances." Thus, based on our careful review of your arguments and the submitted information, we conclude that you may not withhold any portion of the submitted information pursuant to "special circumstances."

Prior decisions of this office have found that financial information relating only to an individual ordinarily satisfies the first requirement of the test for common-law privacy, but that there is a legitimate public interest in the essential facts about a financial transaction between an individual and a governmental body. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 600 (1992), 545 (1990), 373 (1983). For example, a public employee's allocation of his salary to a voluntary investment program or to optional insurance coverage which is offered by his employer is a personal investment decision and information about it is excepted from disclosure under the common law right of privacy. *See* Open Records Decision No. 545 (1990). Likewise, an employee's designation of a retirement beneficiary is excepted from disclosure under the common-law right to privacy. *See* Open Records Decision No. 600 (1992). However, information revealing that an employee participates in a group insurance plan funded partly or wholly by the governmental body is not excepted from disclosure. *See* Open Records Decision No. 600 at 10 (1992).

Generally, the work behavior of a public employee and the conditions for his or her continued employment are matters of legitimate public interest not protected by the common-law right of privacy. Open Records Decision Nos. 438 (1986). Similarly, information about a public employee's qualifications, disciplinary action and background is not protected by common-law privacy. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 444 at 5-6 (1986) (public has interest in public employee's qualifications and performance and the circumstances of his resignation or termination), 405 at 2-3 (1983) (public has interest in manner in which public employee performs his job), 329 at 2 (1982) (information relating to complaints against public employees and discipline resulting therefrom is not protected under former section 552.101 or 552.102), 208 at 2 (1978) (information relating to complaint against public employee and disposition of the complaint is not protected under common-law right of privacy). We have marked some personal financial information that is confidential under the common-law right of privacy and is thus excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code.

Section 552.117 may be applicable to some of the submitted information. Section 552.117(1) excepts from disclosure the home addresses and telephone numbers, 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 552.024.¹ Whether a particular piece of information is protected by section 552.117(1) must be determined at the time the request for it is made. *See* Open Records Decision No. 530 at 5 (1989). Therefore, the sheriff may only withhold information under section 552.117 on behalf of current or former officials or employees who made a request for confidentiality under section 552.024 prior to the date on which the request for this information was made. Provided that the named employee timely elected to keep personal information confidential, the sheriff must withhold the employee's home address and telephone number, social security number, and any information that reveals whether this employee has family members. The sheriff may not withhold this information under section 552.117 if the employee did not make a timely election to keep the information confidential. We have marked the types of information that may be confidential under section 552.117.

We note that social security numbers that are not otherwise excepted from disclosure under section 552.117 might nevertheless be excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 in conjunction with the 1990 amendments to the federal Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. § 405(c)(2)(C)(viii)(I). *See* Open Records Decision No. 622 (1994). These amendments make confidential social security numbers and related records that are obtained and maintained by a state agency or political subdivision of the state pursuant to any provision of law enacted on or after October 1, 1990. *See id.* We have no basis for concluding that the social security number at issue is confidential under section 405(c)(2)(C)(viii)(I), and therefore excepted from public disclosure under section 552.101 on the basis of that federal provision. We caution, however, that section 552.352 of the Public Information Act imposes criminal penalties for the release of confidential information. Prior to releasing the social security number, the sheriff should ensure that it did not obtain or maintain the social security number pursuant to any provision of law, enacted on or after October 1, 1990.

You claim that a portion of the submitted information is excepted from public disclosure under section 552.130 of the Government Code. Section 552.130 provides in relevant part:

(a) Information is excepted from the requirement of Section 552.021 if the information relates to:

(1) a motor vehicle operator's or driver's license or permit issued by an agency of this state; [or]

¹We note that you raise section 552.117(2) of the Government Code. Subsection (2) pertains to "peace officers" as defined by article 2.12 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. You have given no indication that the named employee is a "peace officer" as so defined.

(2) a motor vehicle title or registration issued by an agency of this state[.]

We have marked the information that the sheriff must withhold under section 552.130.

In summary, we have marked the information that is confidential under the common-law right of privacy and is thus excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. We have marked the types of information that may be confidential under section 552.117. The social security number may be confidential under federal law. The sheriff must withhold the marked information under section 552.130. The remaining requested information must be released to the requestor.

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, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, 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 Department of Public 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 Texas Building and Procurement Commission 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. We note that a third party may challenge this ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. 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,



Cindy Nettles
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

CN/jh

Ref: ID# 168732

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Ms. B.K. Carter
Fort Bend Star
869 Dulles, Suite C
Stafford, Texas 77477
(w/o enclosures)