



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

June 29, 2016

Ms. Ashley D. Fourt
Assistant Criminal District Attorney
Tarrant County
401 West Belknap, Ninth Floor
Fort Worth, Texas 76196-0201

OR2016-14758

Dear Ms. Fourt:

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# 622326.

The Tarrant County Medical Examiner's Office (the "medical examiner's office") received a request for information pertaining to a specified case. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.108 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Initially, we note, and you acknowledge, the medical examiner's office did not comply with section 552.301 of the Government Code in requesting this decision. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(b). Pursuant to section 552.302 of the Government Code, a governmental body's failure to comply with the procedural requirements of section 552.301 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 (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); *see also* Open Records Decision Nos. 319 (1982), 586 (1991), 630 (1994). This office has held a compelling reason exists to withhold information when third-party interests are at stake or when information is made confidential by another source of law. *See* Open Records

Decision No. 150 (1977) (construing predecessor statute). We note section 552.108 of the Government Code is a discretionary exception to disclosure that protects a governmental body's interests and may be waived. *See* Open Records Decision No. 177 (1977) (governmental body may waive statutory predecessor to section 552.108); *see also* Open Records Decision Nos. 665 at 2 n.5 (2000) (discretionary exceptions generally), 663 at 5 (1999) (waiver of discretionary exceptions). Thus, in failing to comply with section 552.301, the medical examiner's office has waived its argument under section 552.108, and may not withhold the submitted information on the basis of its own interest under section 552.108. However, the need of a governmental body other than the agency that is seeking an open records decision to withhold information under section 552.108 of the Government Code can provide a compelling reason to withhold information from disclosure. *See* ORD 586 at 3. Because you inform us, and provide documentation showing, the Dallas County District Attorney's Office (the "district attorney's office") objects to the release of the information at issue, we will consider whether the medical examiner's office may withhold the submitted information under section 552.108 on behalf of the district attorney's office.

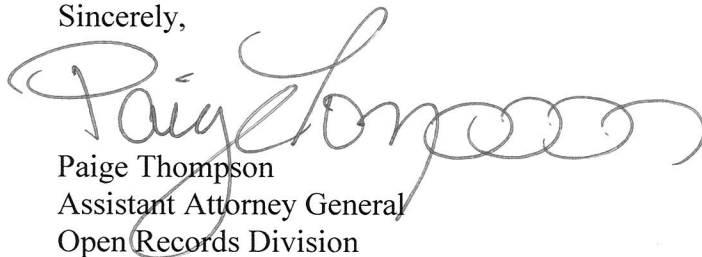
Section 552.108(a)(1) of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "[i]nformation held by a law enforcement agency or prosecutor that deals with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of crime . . . if . . . release of the information would interfere with the detection, investigation, or prosecution of crime[.]" Gov't Code § 552.108(a)(1). A governmental body claiming section 552.108(a)(1) must reasonably explain how and why the release of the requested information would interfere with law enforcement. *See id.* §§ 552.108(a)(1), .301(e)(1)(A); *see also Ex parte Pruitt*, 551 S.W.2d 706 (Tex. 1977). Section 552.108 may be invoked by the proper custodian of information relating to a pending investigation or prosecution of criminal conduct. *See* Open Records Decision No. 474 at 4-5 (1987). Where a non-law enforcement agency has custody of information that would otherwise qualify for exception under section 552.108 as information relating to the pending case of a law enforcement agency, the custodian of the records may withhold the information if it provides this office with a demonstration the information relates to the pending case and a representation from the law enforcement agency that it wishes to have the information withheld.

You state the submitted information is related to an ongoing prosecution with the district attorney's office. You state the district attorney's office objects to disclosure of the information at issue because its release would interfere with the prosecution. Based on your representation, we conclude the medical examiner's office may withhold the submitted information under section 552.108(a)(1) of the Government Code on behalf of the district attorney's office. *See Houston Chronicle Publ'g Co. v. City of Houston*, 531 S.W.2d 177 (Tex. Civ. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1975) (court delineates law enforcement interests that are present in active cases), *writ ref'd n.r.e. per curiam*, 536 S.W.2d 559 (Tex. 1976).

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,



Paige Thompson
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

PT/dls

Ref: ID# 622326

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)

Third Party
(w/o enclosures)