



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

This ruling has been modified by court action.
The ruling and judgment can be viewed in PDF
format below.



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

July 14, 2016

Mr. Jonathan L. Almanza
Assistant District Attorney
County of Hidalgo
100 North Clossner, Room 303
Edinburg, Texas 78539

The ruling you have requested has been amended as a result of litigation and has been attached to this document.

OR2016-15976

Dear Mr. Almanza:

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# 618633 (PIR No. 2016-0057-DA.SO).

The Hidalgo County Sheriff's Office (the "sheriff's office") received a request for all separation of employment records for employees who retired or were terminated during a specified time period. You state the sheriff's office will release some information. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101 and 552.108 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information. We have also received and considered comments from the requestor. *See Gov't Code § 552.304* (interested party may submit comments stating why information should or should not be released).

We note the sheriff's office redacted portions of the submitted information. A governmental body may not withhold information from the public without asking this office for a decision under section 552.301 of the Government Code unless a provision of the Act or a previous determination specifically authorizes the governmental body to do so. *See id.* § 552.301(a); *see also* Open Records Decision No. 673 (2001) (previous determinations). The sheriff's office does not assert, nor does our review of the records indicate, the sheriff's office has been authorized to withhold the redacted information without seeking a ruling from this office. *See Gov't Code § 552.301(a); ORD 673.* Therefore, information must be submitted in a manner that enables this office to determine whether the information comes within the scope

of an exception to disclosure. In this instance, we can discern the nature of the redacted information; thus, being deprived of this information does not inhibit our ability to make a ruling. In the future, however, the sheriff's office should refrain from redacting any information it is not authorized to withhold in seeking an open records ruling. Failure to do so may result in the presumption the redacted information is public. *See* Gov't Code § 552.302.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." *Id.* § 552.101. This section encompasses information made confidential by other statutes, such as section 261.201(a) 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 this chapter 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 this chapter or in providing services as a result of an investigation.

Fam. Code § 261.201(a); *see id.* §§ 101.003(a) (defining "child" for purposes of this section as person under 18 years of age who is not and has not been married or who has not had disabilities of minority removed for general purposes), 261.001(1), (4) (defining "abuse" and "neglect" for purposes of Family Code chapter 261). The sheriff's office claims Exhibit C is confidential under section 261.201. However, we find the information in Exhibit C relates to an internal affairs investigation by the sheriff's office. You have not established this information consists of a report of child abuse or neglect nor does the information reveal the identity of an individual who made a report of suspected child abuse or neglect for the purposes of section 261.201(a)(1) of the Family Code. Furthermore, we find you failed to establish any of the information at issue was used or developed in an investigation of alleged or suspected child abuse or neglect under chapter 261 of the Family Code and may not be withheld on the basis of subsection 261.201(a)(2). Therefore, Exhibit C is not confidential under section 261.201 of the Family Code and it may not be withheld under section 552.101 of the Government Code on that basis.

Section 552.108(a) 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: (1) 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 explain how and why the release of the information at issue 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, 710 (Tex. 1977). However, section 552.108 is generally not applicable to records of an internal affairs investigation that is purely administrative in nature and does not involve the criminal investigation or prosecution of alleged misconduct. *See, e.g., Morales v. Ellen*, 840 S.W.2d 519, 526 (Tex. App.—El Paso 1992, writ denied) (statutory predecessor to section 552.108 not applicable to internal investigation that did not result in criminal investigation or prosecution); *see also City of Fort Worth v. Cornyn*, 86 S.W.3d 320, 329 (Tex. App.—Austin 2002, no pet.) (section 552.108 generally not applicable to law enforcement agency’s personnel records); Open Records Decision No. 350 at 3-4 (1982). Exhibit C consists of an internal administrative investigation of a sheriff’s office deputy. Although you state the internal affairs investigation is ongoing and may result in potential prosecution, you have not informed us of an active criminal investigation or prosecution that has resulted from the internal affairs investigation. Thus, upon review, we find you have failed to demonstrate the applicability of section 552.108(a)(1) to Exhibit C and may not withhold it on that basis.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code also encompasses the doctrine of common-law privacy, which protects information that is (1) highly intimate or embarrassing, the publication of which would be highly objectionable to a reasonable person, and (2) 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 satisfied. *Id.* at 681-82. Types of information considered intimate and embarrassing by the Texas Supreme Court are delineated in *Industrial Foundation*. *Id.* at 683. This office has concluded information that either identifies or tends to identify a victim of sexual assault or other sex-related offense must be withheld under common-law privacy. Open Records Decision No. 393 at 2 (1983); *see also Morales*, 840 S.W.2d 519 (identity of witnesses to and victims of sexual harassment was highly intimate or embarrassing information and public did not have a legitimate interest in such information). Upon review, we find the information we marked meets the standard articulated by the Texas Supreme Court in *Industrial Foundation*. Thus, the sheriff’s office must withhold the information we have marked under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common-law privacy. However, you have failed to demonstrate the remaining information at issue is highly intimate or embarrassing and of no legitimate public interest. Thus, the remaining information at issue may not be withheld under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common-law privacy. The sheriff’s office must release the remaining information.

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,



Britni Ramirez
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

BR/bhf

Ref: ID# 618633

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)

APR 10 2019

At 8:48 A.M.
Velva L. Price, District Clerk

Cause No. D-1-GN-16-003797

HIDALGO COUNTY SHERIFF'S
OFFICE,
Plaintiff,

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IN THE DISTRICT COURT OF

v.

OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY
GENERAL OF THE STATE OF
TEXAS,
Defendant.

TRAVIS COUNTY, TEXAS

419th JUDICIAL DISTRICT

AGREED ORDER OF DISMISSAL

This is a cause of action under the Public Information Act (PIA), Texas Government Code chapter 552. Plaintiff Hidalgo County Sheriff's Office and Defendant Ken Paxton, Attorney General of Texas, agree to dismiss this suit pursuant to PIA section 552.327 because the requestor has voluntarily withdrawn his request for information in writing. See Tex. Gov't Code § 552.327. A court may dismiss a PIA suit under section 552.327 when all parties agree to dismissal and the Attorney General determines and represents to the Court that the requestor has voluntarily withdrawn the request for information in writing or has abandoned the request. *Id.* The Attorney General represents to the Court that the requestor, Dave Hendricks, has voluntarily withdrawn his request for information in writing. The Court is of the opinion that entry of an agreed dismissal order is appropriate.



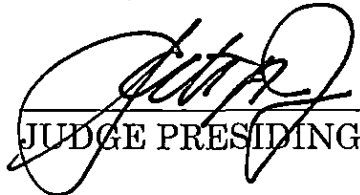
It is THEREFORE, ORDERED, ADJUDGED and DECREED that this cause is DISMISSED in all respects;

All costs of the court and attorney fees are taxed against the parties incurring the same;

All relief not expressly granted is denied; and

This order disposes of all claims between the parties and is final.

Signed this 10th day of April, 2019.



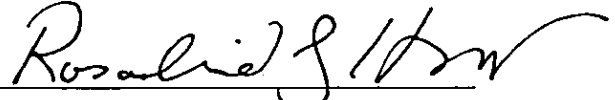
JUDGE PRESIDING

AGREED:



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