



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

June 15, 2017

Mr. Thomas M. Gilliland
Public Information Officer
Harris County Sheriff's Office
1200 Baker Street, 2ND Floor
Houston, Texas 77002-1206

OR2017-13286

Dear Mr. Gilliland:

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# 664462 (HCSO File No. 17SO8001376).

The Harris County Sheriff's Office (the "sheriff's office") received a request for a specified incident report involving a named individual. 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 the submitted information contains court-filed documents subject to section 552.022(a)(17) of the Government Code. Section 552.022(a)(17) provides for required public disclosure of "information that is also contained in a public court record[.]" unless the information is made confidential under the Act or other law. Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(17). Although you assert this information, which we have marked, is excepted from disclosure under 552.108 of the Government Code, this exception is discretionary in nature and does 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), 177 at 3 (1977) (statutory predecessor to section 552.108 subject to waiver). Therefore, the sheriff's office may not withhold any of the information subject to section 552.022(a)(17) under section 552.108. In addition, we note information that has been filed with a court is not protected by common-law privacy. *See Star-Telegram v. Walker*, 834 S.W.2d 54 (Tex. 1992) (common-law privacy not applicable to court-filed document). Therefore, the sheriff's office may not withhold the

information subject to section 552.022(a)(17) under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common-law privacy. As no further exceptions to disclosure are raised for this information, it must be released. However, we will address whether the remaining information not subject to section 552.022(a)(17) of the Government Code is excepted from disclosure.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure “information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision.”¹ Gov’t Code § 552.101. Section 552.101 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. In Open Records Decision No. 393 (1983), this office concluded that, generally, only that information which either identifies or tends to identify a victim of sexual assault or other sex-related offense may be withheld under common-law privacy; however, because the identifying information was inextricably intertwined with other releasable information, the governmental body was required to withhold the entire report. Open Records Decision No. 393 at 2 (1983); *see* Open Records Decision No. 339 (1982); *see also Morales v. Ellen*, 840 S.W.2d 519 (Tex. App.—El Paso 1992, writ denied) (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); Open Records Decision No. 440 (1986) (detailed descriptions of serious sexual offenses must be withheld). The requestor in this case knows the identity of the alleged victim of sexual assault. We believe that, in this instance, withholding only identifying information from the requestor would not preserve the victim’s common-law right to privacy. We conclude, therefore, that the sheriff’s office must withhold the information not subject to section 552.022(a)(17) of the Government Code under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common-law privacy.²

In summary, the sheriff’s office must release the court-filed documents we marked under section 552.022(a)(17) of the Government Code. The sheriff’s office must withhold the remaining information under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common-law privacy.

¹The Office of the Attorney General will raise a mandatory exception on behalf of a governmental body, but ordinarily will not raise other exceptions. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 481 (1987), 480 (1987), 470(1987).

²As our ruling is dispositive, we need not address your remaining arguments against disclosure of this 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,



Michael A. Pearle
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

MAP/eb

Ref: ID# 664462

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)