



**KEN PAXTON**  
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

September 21, 2017

Ms. Ashley D. Fourt  
Assistant Criminal District Attorney  
Civil Division  
Dallas County  
411 Elm Street, 5th Floor  
Dallas, Texas 75202-3317

OR2017-21667

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# 676812.

The Dallas County Medical Examiner's Office (the "medical examiner's office") received a request for the autopsy findings of a named individual. You argue the submitted information does not consist of public information subject to the Act. In the alternative, you claim the submitted information is exempted from disclosure under sections 552.103 and 552.108 of the Government Code.<sup>1</sup> We have considered the submitted arguments and reviewed the submitted information.

You state the medical examiner's office occasionally performs autopsies for smaller surrounding counties. You state, and provide documentation showing, the autopsy at issue

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<sup>1</sup>Although you also raise section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with sections 552.103 and 552.108 of the Government Code, this office has concluded section 552.101 does not encompass other exceptions found in the Act. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 676 at 1-2 (2002), 575 at 2 (1990). Accordingly, we do not address your argument under section 552.101.

was performed by the medical examiner's office pursuant to a referral by the Ellis County Justice of the Peace, Precinct 2 (the "justice of the peace") as part of a judicial inquest into the death of the named individual. *See* Crim. Proc. Code arts. §§ 49.04 (requiring justice of the peace to conduct inquest in certain circumstances), .10 (listing circumstances in which autopsy shall be performed), .15(a) (requiring inquest record to be maintained in office of justice of the peace), .15(b)(8) (requiring that inquest record include autopsy report); *see also id.* arts. §§ 49.01-.24 (providing for duties of justice of the peace with regard to inquests and autopsies); Attorney General Opinion GA-0389 (2005). You explain the submitted information is not a record of the medical examiner's office but is held as a judicial inquest record for the justice of the peace. Thus, the instant request is for information maintained on behalf of the justice of the peace.

The Act does not govern access to judicial records. *See* Gov't Code § 552.003(1)(B) (providing that the term "[g]overnmental body" ... does not include the judiciary). "Access to information collected, assembled, or maintained by ... the judiciary is governed by rules adopted by the Texas Supreme Court or by other applicable laws and rules." *Id.* § 552.0035(a). Information collected, assembled, or maintained for the judiciary by an agent of the judiciary is not subject to the Act. *Id.*; *see* Open Records Decision No. 513 at 2 (1988) ("When an individual or entity acts at the direction of a grand jury as the grand jury's agent, information held or collected by the agent is within the grand jury's constructive possession."). Because a justice of the peace is a member of the judiciary, the records that a justice of the peace maintains are not subject to the Act. *See* Tex. Const. art. V, § 1; Open Records Decision No. 25 (1974). Therefore, the Act "neither authorizes information held by the judiciary to be withheld nor requires it to be disclosed." ORD 25 at 3 (construing statutory predecessor). In performing the autopsy at issue, the medical examiner's office was acting as the agent of the justice of the peace who ordered the autopsy, and thus, the requested records are collected and maintained by the medical examiner's office on behalf of the justice of the peace. Accordingly, we find the submitted information is in the constructive possession of the justice of the peace, is consequently not subject to the Act, and need not be released in response to the instant request for information. As we are able to make this determination, we do not address your remaining arguments against disclosure of the 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](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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jahanna Ward', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jahanna Ward  
Attorney  
Open Records Division

JW/tdw

Ref: ID# 676812

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor  
(w/o enclosures)