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ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

November 21, 2019

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OR2019-32990

Dear Ms. Carlton:

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# 798360.

The Hays County Emergency Services District No. 5 (the "district"), which you represent, received a request for a former employee's personnel file. You state the district will redact social security numbers pursuant to section 552.147 of the Government Code.¹ You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.102, and 552.117 of the Government Code.² We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." Gov't Code § 552.101. Section 552.101 of the Government Code encompasses section 6103(a) of title 26 of the United States Code, which renders tax return information confidential. *See* Attorney General Opinion H-1274 (1978) (tax returns); Open Records Decision No. 600 (1992) (W-4 forms). Section 6103(b) defines the term "return information" as

¹ Section 552.147(b) of the Government Code authorizes a governmental body to redact a living person's social security number from public release without the necessity of requesting a decision from this office. *See* Gov't Code § 552.147(b).

² Although you also raise section 552.1175 of the Government Code, we note section 552.117 is the proper exception to raise for information the district holds in its capacity as employer.

encompassing “a taxpayer’s identity, the nature, source, or amount of income, payments, receipts, deductions, exemptions, credits, assets, liabilities, net worth, tax liability, tax withheld, deficiencies, overassessments or tax payments . . . or any other data, received by, recorded by, prepared by, furnished to, or collected by the Secretary [of the Treasury] with respect to a return or with respect to the determination of the existence, or possible existence, of liability . . . for any tax . . . penalty . . . or offense[.]” *See* 26 U.S.C. § 6103(b)(2)(A). Federal courts have construed the term “return information” expansively to include any information gathered by the Internal Revenue Service regarding a taxpayer’s liability under title 26 of the United States Code. *See Mallas v. Kolak*, 721 F. Supp. 748, 754 (M.D.N.C. 1989), *aff’d in part*, 993 F.2d 1111 (4th Cir. 1993). Thus, the submitted W-2 and W-4 forms constitute tax return information that is confidential under section 6103(a) of title 26 of the United States Code. Accordingly, the district must withhold the submitted W-2 and W-4 forms under section 552.101 in conjunction with section 6103(a) of title 26 of the United States Code.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code also encompasses other federal laws, such as the Family and Medical Leave Act (the “FMLA”). *See* 29 U.S.C. §§ 2601 et seq. Section 825.500 of chapter V of title 29 of the Code of Federal Regulations identifies the record-keeping requirements for employers that are subject to the FMLA. Subsection (g) of section 825.500 states:

[r]ecords and documents relating to certifications, recertifications or medical histories of employees or employees’ family members, created for purposes of FMLA, shall be maintained as confidential medical records in separate files/records from the usual personnel files, and if the ADA, as amended, is also applicable, such records shall be maintained in conformance with ADA confidentiality requirements, except that:

- (1) Supervisors and managers may be informed regarding necessary restrictions on the work or duties of an employee and necessary accommodations;
- (2) First aid and safety personnel may be informed (when appropriate) if the employee’s physical or medical condition might require emergency treatment; and
- (3) Government officials investigating compliance with FMLA (or other pertinent law) shall be provided relevant information upon request.

29 C.F.R. § 825.500(g). Upon review, we find you have failed to demonstrate any of the remaining information is subject to the FMLA. Accordingly, the district may not withhold any portion of the remaining information under section 552.101 of the Government Code on that basis.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code also encompasses information made confidential by statute, such as the Medical Practice Act (“MPA”), subtitle B of title 3 of the Occupations Code, which governs release of medical records. Section 159.002 of the MPA provides, in relevant part:

(a) A communication between a physician and a patient, relative to or in connection with any professional services as a physician to the patient, is confidential and privileged and may not be disclosed except as provided by this chapter.

. . . .

(c) A person who receives information from a confidential communication or record as described by this chapter, other than a person listed in Section 159.004 who is acting on the patient’s behalf, may not disclose the information except to the extent that disclosure is consistent with the authorized purposes for which the information was first obtained.

Occ. Code § 159.002(a), (c). Information subject to the MPA includes both medical records and information obtained from those medical records. *See id.* §§ 159.002, .004; Open Records Decision No. 598 (1991). This office has concluded the protection afforded by section 159.002 extends only to records created by either a physician or someone under the supervision of a physician. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 487 (1987), 370 (1983), 343 (1982).

Upon review, we find some of the remaining information constitutes records of the identity, diagnosis, evaluation, or treatment of a patient by a physician that were created or are maintained by a physician. Accordingly, the district must withhold the information we marked under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with the MPA.³ In addition, we note some of the remaining information was created by a nurse. The district must withhold these documents under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with the MPA only if they were created under the supervision of a physician, or if they contain information taken directly from records created by or under the supervision of a physician. If the documents created by a nurse were not created under the supervision of a physician, or if they do not contain information taken directly from records created by or under the supervision of a physician, they are not subject to the MPA and the district may not withhold them under section 552.101 on that basis. However, we find none of the remaining information constitutes medical records subject to section 159.002. Therefore, the district may not withhold any portion of the remaining information under section 552.101 of the Government Code on that basis.

³ As our ruling is dispositive, we need not address the remaining arguments against disclosure of this information.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code also encompasses information made confidential by section 181.006 of the Health and Safety Code. Section 181.006 states that “[f]or a covered entity that is a governmental unit, an individual’s protected health information . . . is not public information and is not subject to disclosure under [the Act].” Health & Safety Code § 181.006(2). Section 181.001(b)(2)(A) defines “covered entity,” in part, as any person who:

for commercial, financial, or professional gain, monetary fees, or dues, or on a cooperative, nonprofit, or pro bono basis, engages, in whole or in part, and with real or constructive knowledge, in the practice of assembling, collecting, analyzing, using, evaluating, storing, or transmitting protected health information. The term includes a business associate, health care payer, governmental unit, information or computer management entity, school, health researcher, health care facility, clinic, health care provider, or person who maintains an Internet site[.]

Id. § 181.001(b)(2)(A). You assert the district is a covered entity for purposes of section 181.006 of the Health and Safety Code. However, in order to determine whether the district is a covered entity, we must address whether the system engages in the practice of assembling, collecting, analyzing, using, evaluating, storing, or transmitting protected health information. Section 181.001 states that “[u]nless otherwise defined in this chapter, each term that is used in this chapter has the meaning assigned by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act and Privacy Standards [“HIPAA”].” *Id.* § 181.001(a). Accordingly, as chapter 181 does not define “protected health information,” we turn to HIPAA’s definition of the term. HIPAA defines “protected health information” as individually identifiable health information that is transmitted or maintained in electronic media or any other form or medium. *See* 45 C.F.R. § 160.103. HIPAA defines “individually identifiable health information” as information that is a subset of health information, including demographic information collected from an individual, and:

- (1) Is created or received by a health care provider, health plan, employer, or health care clearinghouse; and
- (2) Relates to the past, present, or future physical or mental health or condition of an individual; the provision of health care to an individual; or the past, present, or future payment for the provision of health care to an individual; and
 - (i) That identifies the individual; or
 - (ii) With respect to which there is a reasonable basis to believe the information can be used to identify the individual.

Id. Although you assert the district is a covered entity, you have not explained how the remaining information consists of protected health information. Thus, we find you have

failed to demonstrate the applicability of section 181.006 of the Health and Safety Code. Accordingly, the district may not withhold any of the remaining information under section 552.101 of the Government Code on that basis.

Section 552.102(a) of the Government Code excepts from disclosure “information in a personnel file, the disclosure of which would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy.” Gov’t Code § 552.102(a). We understand you to assert the privacy analysis under section 552.102(a) is the same as the common-law privacy test under section 552.101 of the Government Code. Section 552.101 of the Government Code encompasses common-law privacy, which protects information if it (1) contains highly intimate or embarrassing facts, the publication of which would be highly objectionable to a reasonable person, and (2) is not of legitimate concern to the public. *Indus. Found. v. Tex. Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668, 685 (Tex. 1976). In *Hubert v. Harte-Hanks Texas Newspapers, Inc.*, 652 S.W.2d 546, 549-51 (Tex. App.—Austin 1983, writ ref’d n.r.e.), the court of appeals ruled the privacy test under section 552.102(a) is the same as the *Industrial Foundation* privacy test. However, the Texas Supreme Court has expressly disagreed with *Hubert’s* interpretation of section 552.102(a) and held the privacy standard under section 552.102(a) differs from the *Industrial Foundation* test under section 552.101. *See Tex. Comptroller of Pub. Accounts v. Attorney Gen. of Tex.*, 354 S.W.3d 336 (Tex. 2010). The supreme court also considered the applicability of section 552.102(a) and held it excepts from disclosure the dates of birth of state employees in the payroll database of the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts. *See id.* at 348. Upon review, we find the district must withhold the date of birth of the employee at issue under section 552.102(a) of the Government Code. However, the remaining information does not consist of employee dates of birth and may not be withheld under section 552.102(a) of the Government Code.

As stated above, section 552.101 of the Government Code also encompasses the doctrine of common-law privacy, which is subject to the two-part test discussed above. *Indus. Found.*, 540 S.W.2d at 685. 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. Additionally, this office has concluded some kinds of medical information are generally highly intimate or embarrassing. *See* Open Records Decision No. 455 (1987). This office has also found personal financial information not relating to a financial transaction between an individual and a governmental body is excepted from required public disclosure under common-law privacy. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 600 (1992) (designation of beneficiary of employee’s retirement benefits, direct deposit authorization, and forms allowing employee to allocate pre-tax compensation to group insurance, health care or dependent care), 545 (1990) (deferred compensation information, participation in voluntary investment program, election of optional insurance coverage, mortgage payments, assets, bills, and credit history). We also note this office has found the public has a legitimate interest in information relating to applicants and employees of governmental bodies and their employment qualifications and job performance, especially where the applicant was seeking a position in law enforcement. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 562 at 10 (1990), 470 at 4 (1987) (public has legitimate interest in job qualifications

and performance of public employees), 455 at 9 (1987) (applicant salary information is of legitimate public interest because it “bears on the applicants’ past employment record and their suitability for the employment position in question”), 444 (1986), 423 at 2 (1984) (scope of public employee privacy is narrow). Criminal history information obtained by a law enforcement agency in the process of hiring a peace officer is also a matter of legitimate public interest. Upon review, we find portions of the remaining information satisfy the standard articulated by the Texas Supreme Court in *Industrial Foundation*. Thus, the district must withhold the information we marked under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common-law privacy. However, we find you have failed to demonstrate the remaining information is highly intimate or embarrassing and not of legitimate public concern. Thus, none of the remaining information may be withheld under section 552.101 in conjunction with common-law privacy.

Section 552.117(a)(16) of the Government Code excepts from disclosure the home address and telephone number, emergency contact information, social security number, and family member information of a firefighter or volunteer firefighter or emergency medical services personnel as defined by Section 773.003 of the Health and Safety Code, regardless of whether the current or former employee complies with section 552.024 or 552.1175. Act of May 27, 2019, 86th Leg., R.S., H.B. 2446, § 4 (to be codified at Gov’t Code § 552.117(a)(16)). We note section 552.117 is also applicable to personal cellular telephone numbers, provided the cellular telephone service is not paid for by a governmental body. *See* Open Records Decision No. 506 at 5-6 (1988) (section 552.117 not applicable to cellular telephone numbers paid for by governmental body and intended for official use). Accordingly, the district must withhold the information we have marked under section 552.117(a)(16) of the Government Code; however, the marked cellular telephone number may be withheld only if a governmental body does not pay for the cellular telephone service.

If the information we marked under section 552.117 does not pertain to individuals who are firefighters, volunteer firefighters, or emergency medical services personnel, then the information at issue may be subject to section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code. Section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code excepts from disclosure the home addresses and telephone numbers, emergency contact information, social security number, and family member information of a current or former employee of a governmental body who requests this information be kept confidential under section 552.024. Gov’t Code § 552.117(a)(1). As previously mentioned, section 552.117(a) is applicable to personal cellular telephone numbers, provided the cellular telephone service is not paid for by a governmental body. *See* ORD 506 at 5-6. Whether a particular item of information is protected by section 552.117(a)(1) must be determined at the time of the governmental body’s receipt of the request for the information. *See* Open Records Decision No. 530 at 5 (1989). The district may only withhold information under section 552.117(a)(1) on behalf of current or former employees who made a request for confidentiality under section 552.024 prior to the date on which the request for this information was made. Therefore, if the individuals whose information is at issue timely requested confidentiality under section 552.024 of the Government Code and a governmental body does not pay for the cellular telephone service,

the district must withhold the information we have marked under section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code. Conversely, if the individual at issue did not timely request confidentiality under section 552.024 the district may not withhold the information we marked under section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code.

Section 552.130 of the Government Code provides information relating to a motor vehicle operator's license, driver's license, motor vehicle title or registration, or personal identification document issued by an agency of this state or another state or country is excepted from public release.⁴ Gov't Code § 552.130. Accordingly, the district must withhold the motor vehicle record information we marked under section 552.130 of the Government Code.

Section 552.136(b) of the Government Code provides, "[n]otwithstanding any other provision of [the Act], a credit card, debit card, charge card, or access device number that is collected, assembled, or maintained by or for a governmental body is confidential." *Id.* § 552.136(b); *see id.* § 552.136(a) (defining "access device"). This office has concluded insurance policy numbers constitute access device numbers for purposes of section 552.136. Open Records Decision No. 684 (2009). Accordingly, the district must withhold the account numbers, credit card numbers, and insurance policy number within the remaining information under section 552.136 of the Government Code.

Section 552.137 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "an e-mail address of a member of the public that is provided for the purpose of communicating electronically with a governmental body" unless the member of the public consents to its release or the e-mail address is of a type specifically excluded by subsection (c). *See id.* § 552.137(a)-(c). The e-mail address at issue does not appear to be the type specifically excluded by subsection (c). Upon review, we find the district must withhold the personal e-mail addresses we marked under section 552.137 of the Government Code, unless the owners affirmatively consent to their public disclosure.

In summary, the district must withhold the submitted W-2 and W-4 forms under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction section 6103(a) of title 26 of the United States Code. The district must withhold the information we marked under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with the MPA; however, the district must withhold the documents created by a nurse under the MPA only if they were created under the supervision of a physician, or if they contain information taken directly from records created by or under the supervision of a physician. The district must withhold the date of birth of the employee at issue under section 552.102(a) of the Government Code. The district must withhold the information we marked under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common-law privacy. To the extent the information we marked pertains to individuals who are currently firefighters, volunteer firefighters, or emergency medical services personnel as defined by section 773.003 of the Health and Safety Code,

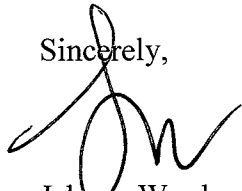
⁴ The Office of the Attorney General will raise mandatory exceptions on behalf of a governmental body, but ordinarily will not raise other exceptions. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 481 (1987), 480 (1987), 470.

the district must withhold the marked information under section 552.117(a)(16) of the Government Code; however, the marked cellular telephone numbers may be withheld only if a governmental body does not pay for the cellular telephone service. To the extent the individuals whose information is at issue are not currently firefighters, volunteer firefighters, or emergency medical services personnel as defined by section 773.003 of the Health and Safety Code, but timely requested confidentiality under section 552.024 of the Government Code, the district must withhold the information we marked under section 552.117(a)(1) of the Government Code; however, the marked cellular telephone number may be withheld only if a governmental body does not pay for the cellular telephone service. The district must withhold the motor vehicle record information we marked under section 552.130 of the Government Code. The district must withhold the account numbers, credit card numbers, and insurance policy number under section 552.136 of the Government Code. The district must withhold the personal e-mail addresses we marked under section 552.137 of the Government Code, unless the owners affirmatively consent to their public disclosure. The district 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 <https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/open-government/members-public/what-expect-after-ruling-issued> or call the OAG's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. Questions concerning the allowable charges for providing public information under the Public Information Act may be directed to the Cost Rules Administrator of the OAG, toll free, at (888) 672-6787.

Sincerely,



Jahana Ward
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JW/gw

Ref: ID# 798360

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)