



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

January 3, 2020

Mr. Evaristo Garcia, Jr.
Assistant City Attorney
City of McAllen
P.O. Box 220
McAllen, Texas 78505-0220

OR2020-00257

Dear Mr. Garcia:

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# 804221 (ORR# W029200).

The City of McAllen (the "city") received a request for a specified death certificate. The city claims the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.115 of the Government Code. We have considered the claimed exception and reviewed the submitted information.

Section 552.115(a)(2) of the Government Code provides,

(a) A . . . death record maintained by the vital statistics unit of the [Texas Department of State Health Services ("the department")] or a local registration official is excepted from [required public disclosure], except that:

...

(2) a death record is public information and available to the public on and after the 25th anniversary of the date of death as shown on the record filed with the vital statistics unit or local registration official[.]

Gov't Code § 552.115(a)(2). Section 552.115 is applicable only to information maintained by the vital statistics unit or a local registration official. *See* Open Records Decision No. 338 (1982). The city states the submitted death certificate is maintained by its local

registration official in the vital statistics department. The city further states the death certificate is not older than twenty-five years and the decedent is identified. Based on these representations, we find the city must generally withhold the submitted death certificate under section 552.115 of the Government Code. *See* Health & Safety Code § 191.022(b) (municipal clerk or secretary is local register of births and deaths in a municipality with population of 2,500 or more).

However, some of the submitted information is subject to 193.001 of the Health and Safety Code. Section 193.001 pertains to the form of death certificates and states, in relevant part, the following:

(c) The department shall require death certificates and fetal death certificates to include the name of the place and the specific number of the plot, crypt, lawn crypt, or niche in which a decedent's remains will be interred or, if the remains will not be interred, the place and manner of other disposition.

(d) The department and each local registrar shall make the information provided under Subsection (c) available to the public and may collect a fee in an amount prescribed under Section 191.0045 for providing that service.

Id. § 193.001(c), (d). Thus, section 193.001(d) grants a statutory right of access to the information listed in section 193.001(c) regarding the place and manner of the disposition of the decedent's remains. Because section 552.115 of the Government Code has its own access provisions, section 552.115 is not a general exception under the Act. The release provisions of section 552.115 do not permit access in this case. Therefore, we must address the conflict between the access provided under section 193.001(d) of the Health and Safety Code and the confidentiality provided under section 552.115 of the Government Code. Where information falls within both a general and a specific statutory provision, the specific provision prevails over the general statute unless the general provision was enacted later and there is clear evidence that the legislature intended the general provision to prevail. *See* Gov't Code § 311.026(b); *Cuellar v. State*, 521 S.W.2d 277 (Tex. Crim. App. 1975) (under well-established rule of statutory construction, specific statutory provisions prevail over general ones); Open Records Decision Nos. 598 (1991), 583 (1990), 451 (1986). Section 193.001(d) of the Health and Safety Code is a more specific statute than section 552.115 because section 193.001(d) applies specifically to the information listed in section 193.001(c), while section 552.115 applies generally to birth and death records. *See* Attorney General Opinion DM-146 (1992) (Health and Safety Code and regulations promulgated thereunder govern how death records are to be made available to public more specifically than predecessor to the Act). Further, section 552.115 and its statutory predecessor, article 6252-17a section 3(a)(15) of the Texas Civil Statutes, were enacted prior to the release provision in section 191.001(d).¹ Accordingly, we conclude the "name of the place and the specific number of the plot, crypt, lawn crypt, or niche in which a

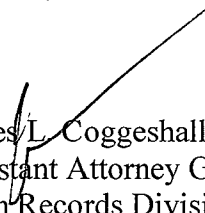
¹ *See* Act of May 22, 1993, 73rd Leg., ch. 268, § 1 (enacting section 552.115 of the Government Code); Act of May 19, 1973, 63rd Leg., ch. 424, § 3, amended by Act of June 11, 1987, 70th Leg., ch. 349, § 1, amended by Act of June 14, 1989, 71st Leg., ch. 920, § 1 (enacting and amending article 6252-17a section 3(a)(15)); Act of June 12, 1995, 74th Leg., ch. 502, § 2, 1995 (enacting section 193.001(d) of the Health and Safety Code).

decident's remains will be interred or, if the remains will not be interred, the place and manner of other disposition" contained in the submitted death certificate must be released pursuant to section 193.001(d) of the Health and Safety Code. The city must withhold the remaining information under section 552.115 of the Government Code.

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,



James L. Coggeshall
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JLC/gw

Ref: ID# 804221

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)