



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

June 17, 2020

Ms. Ashley D. Fourt
Assistant Criminal District Attorney
Southwestern Institute of Forensic Sciences
Dallas County
411 Elm Street, 5th Floor
Dallas, Texas 75202

OR2020-16293

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# 832684.

The Southwestern Institute of Forensic Sciences at Dallas (the "institute") received a request for any reports or investigator notes mentioning COVID-19 as a contributing factor in a death. You claim the submitted information is not subject to the Act pursuant to section 552.002(d) of the Government Code. You also claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. We have considered your arguments and reviewed the submitted information.

The Act is applicable only to "public information." *See* Gov't Code §§ 552.002, .021. Section 552.002(a) of the Government Code reads as follows:

(a) In this chapter, "public information" means information that is written, produced, collected, assembled, or maintained under a law or ordinance or in connection with the transaction of official business:

(1) by a governmental body;

(2) for a governmental body and the governmental body:

(A) owns the information;

(B) has a right of access to the information; or

(C) spends or contributes public money for the purpose of writing, producing, collecting, assembling, or maintaining the information; or

(3) by an individual officer or employee of a governmental body in the officer's or employee's official capacity and the information pertains to official business of the governmental body.

Id. § 552.002(a). However, you assert portions of the requested information are not subject to the Act pursuant to section 552.002(d) of the Government Code, which provides:

“Protected health information” as defined by Section 181.006, Health and Safety Code, is not public information and is not subject to disclosure under this chapter.

Id. § 552.002(d). Section 181.006 of the Health and Safety Code, in relevant part, states:

[F]or a covered entity that is a governmental unit, an individual's protected health information:

(1) includes any information that reflects that an individual received health care from the covered entity[.]

Health & Safety Code § 181.006(1). 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 do not assert the institute is a covered entity and you have not explained how the information at issue 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, we find the information at issue is subject to the Act, and the institute must release it unless it falls within an exception to public disclosure under the Act. *See* Gov't Code §§ 552.006, .021, .301, .302.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code excepts “information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision.” *Id.* § 552.101. This section encompasses section 81.046 of the Health and Safety Code, which provides, in part:

(b) Reports, records, and information relating to cases or suspected cases of diseases or health conditions are not public information under [the Act], and

may not be released or made public on subpoena or otherwise except as provided by Subsections (c), (c-1), (d), and (f).

Health & Safety Code § 81.046(b). In Open Records Decision No. 577 (1990), this office concluded any information acquired or created during an investigation under chapter 81 of the Health and Safety Code is confidential and may not be released unless an exception in the statute applies. *See* ORD 577; Health & Safety Code § 81.046(b)-(d), (f). You contend the submitted information relates to investigations of cases or suspected cases of an infectious disease; thus, section 81.046 governs the release of the information at issue. We understand the release provisions of section 81.046 are not applicable. Accordingly, the institute must withhold the submitted information under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 81.046(b) of the Health and Safety 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,

Michelle Garza
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

MRG/eb

Ref: ID# 832684

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)