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ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

June 23, 2020

Mr. Jeremy R. Page
Counsel for the City of Lancaster
Brown & Hofmeister, L.L.P.
740 East Campbell Road, Suite 800
Richardson, Texas 75081

OR2020-16401

Dear Mr. Page:

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# 833144 (PIR No. W15493).

The City of Lancaster (the "city"), which you represent, received a request for information pertaining to a specified incident. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code.¹ We have considered the exception 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. This section encompasses information protected by other statutes, such as section 261.201 of the Family Code, which provides, in part, as follows:

(a) [T]he following information is confidential, is not subject to public release under Chapter 552, Government Code, and may be disclosed only for purposes consistent with this code and applicable federal or state law or under rules adopted by an investigating agency:

¹ We note the city did not comply with section 552.301 of the Government Code in requesting a ruling from this office. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(b), (e). Nonetheless, because section 552.101 of the Government Code can provide a compelling reason to overcome the presumption of openness, we will consider its applicability to the submitted information. *See id.* §§ 552.007, .302, .352.

(1) a report of alleged or suspected abuse or neglect made under this chapter and the identity of the person making the report; and

(2) except as otherwise provided in this section, the files, reports, records, communications, audiotapes, videotapes, and working papers used or developed in an investigation under this chapter or in providing services as a result of an investigation.

Fam. Code § 261.201(a). Upon review, we find the submitted information was used or developed in an investigation of alleged or suspected child abuse or neglect. *See id.* § 261.001(1), (4) (defining “abuse” and “neglect” for purposes of chapter 261 of the Family Code); *see also id.* § 101.003(a) (defining “child” for purposes of chapter 261 of Family Code). Accordingly, we find this information is subject to chapter 261 of the Family Code. You have not indicated the city’s police department has adopted a rule that governs the release of this type of information. Therefore, we assume no such regulation exists. Given that assumption, the submitted information is confidential pursuant to section 261.201 of the Family Code. *See Open Records Decision No. 440 at 2 (1986) (predecessor statute).* Accordingly, the city must generally withhold the submitted information from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code.

However, the requestor is a representative with the United States Department of Transportation (“DOT”) National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Accordingly, we will consider whether federal law permits the requestor to obtain information that is otherwise protected by the exception discussed above.

Section 30166(b)(1)(B) of title 49 of the United States Code provides:

(b) Authority to inspect and investigate.--

(1) The Secretary of Transportation may conduct an inspection or investigation--_

...

(B) related to a motor vehicle accident and designed to carry out [chapter 301 of title 49 of the United States Code].

49 U.S.C. § 30166(b)(1)(B).² Motor vehicle accident is defined as “an occurrence associated with the maintenance or operation of a motor vehicle or motor vehicle equipment resulting in personal injury, death, or property damage.” *Id.* § 30166(a). The report at issue concerns a motor vehicle accident as defined in this chapter. Therefore, the

²We note the purpose of Chapter 301 of the United States Code is “to reduce traffic accidents and deaths and injuries resulting from traffic accidents” and (1) to prescribe motor vehicle safety standards for motor vehicles and motor vehicle equipment in interstate commerce; and (2) to carry out needed safety research and development. 49 U.S.C. § 30101.

DOT has the authority to conduct an investigation concerning the motor vehicle accident at issue pursuant to section 30166(b)(1)(B) of title 49.

Further, section 30166(c) of title 49 states in part:

(c) Matters that can be inspected and impoundment.-- In carrying out this chapter, an officer or employee designated by the Secretary of Transportation--

(1) at reasonable times, may inspect and copy any record related to this chapter[.]

Id. § 30166(c)(1). The requestor is an investigator with the DOT who seeks the information for the purpose of performing motor vehicle safety research. Therefore, we conclude this requestor has the right to inspect and copy records related to motor vehicle accidents pursuant to an investigation under chapter 301 of title 49 of the United States Code. As discussed above, the report at issue concerns a motor vehicle accident as defined by section 30166(a) of title 49 of the United States Code. Therefore, under federal law, the requestor has the right to inspect and copy the report at issue.

Thus, there is a conflict between the requestor's right of access under section 30166(a) of title 49 of the United States Code and the confidentiality requirements in section 261.201 of the Family Code. As federal law, section 30166 of title 49 preempts any conflicting state provisions, including section 261.201 of the Family Code. *See English v. General Elec. Co.*, 496 U.S. 72, 79 (1990) (noting that state law is preempted to extent it actually conflicts with federal law); *Louisiana Pub. Serv. Comm'n v. FCC*, 476 U.S. 355, 369 (1986) (noting that federal agency acting within scope of its congressionally delegated authority may preempt state regulation). Thus, although the submitted information is confidential under section 261.201 of the Family Code, the requestor's right of access under federal law preempts the state statute. In addition, the requestor's right of access under federal law preempts the protection afforded by section 552.108 of the Government Code. *See U.S. Const. art. VI, cl. 2* (Supremacy Clause); *Delta Airlines, Inc. v. Black*, 116 S.W.3d 745, 748 (Tex. 2003) (discussing federal preemption of state law). Therefore, the city must allow the requestor to inspect and copy the submitted information pursuant to section 30166(c)(1) of title 49 of the United States Code.³

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->

³Because this requestor has a special right of access to information being released, in the event the city receives another request for this information from someone without such a right of access, the city must again ask this office for a ruling.

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[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,

Britni Ramirez
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

BR/rm

Ref: ID# 833144

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)