



**KEN PAXTON**  
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

August 4, 2020

Ms. Amy Bass-Domel  
Open Records  
Williamson County Sheriff's Office  
508 South Rock Street  
Georgetown, Texas 78626

OR2020-19477

Dear Ms. Bass-Domel:

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# 838281.

The Williamson County Sheriff's Office (the "sheriff's office") received two requests from three requestors for telephone and visitation records for one of the requestors. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.130, and 552.137 of the Government Code. 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 encompasses the doctrine of constitutional privacy. Constitutional privacy consists of two interrelated types of privacy: (1) the right to make certain kinds of decisions independently and (2) an individual's interest in avoiding disclosure of personal matters. Open Records Decision No. 455 at 4 (1987). The first type protects an individual's autonomy within "zones of privacy" which include matters related to marriage, procreation, contraception, family relationships, and child rearing and education. *Id.* The second type of constitutional privacy requires a balancing between the individual's privacy interests and the public's need to know information of public concern. *Id.* The scope of information protected is narrower than that under the common law doctrine of privacy; the information must concern the "most intimate aspects of human affairs." *Id.* at 5 (quoting *Ramie v. City of Hedwig Village, Tex.*, 765 F.2d 490, 492 (5th Cir. 1985)).

This office has applied privacy to protect certain information about incarcerated individuals. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 430 (1985), 428 (1985), 185 (1978). Citing *State v. Ellefson*, 224 S.E.2d 666 (S.C. 1976) as authority, this office held that those individuals who correspond with inmates possess a “first amendment right . . . to maintain communication with [the inmate] free of the threat of public exposure;” and that this right would be violated by the release of information that identifies those correspondents, because such a release would discourage correspondence. ORD 185. The information at issue in Open Records Decision No. 185 was the identities of individuals who had corresponded with inmates, and our office found that “the public’s right to obtain an inmate’s correspondence list is not sufficient to overcome the first amendment right of the inmate’s correspondents to maintain communication with him free of the threat of public exposure.” ORD 185. Implicit in this holding is the fact that an individual’s association with an inmate may be intimate or embarrassing. In Open Records Decision Nos. 428 and 430, our office determined that inmate visitor and mail logs which identify inmates and those who choose to visit or correspond with inmates are protected by constitutional privacy because people who correspond with inmates have a First Amendment right to do so that would be threatened if their names were released. ORDs 428 and 430. Further, we recognized that inmates had a constitutional right to visit with outsiders and could also be threatened if their names were released. *See also* ORD 185. The rights of those individuals to anonymity was found to outweigh the public’s interest in this information. *Id.*; *see* ORD 430 (list of inmate visitors protected by constitutional privacy of both inmate and visitors).

Although one of the first requestors is a party to the communications and the other two requestors may be acting as authorized representatives of this requestor, the requestors do not have a right of access to the information at issue under section 552.023 of the Government Code because the constitutional rights of the other parties are also implicated. *See* Gov’t Code § 552.023(a) (person or person’s authorized representative has special right of access, beyond right of general public, to information held by governmental body that relates to the person and is protected from public disclosure by laws intended to protect that person’s privacy interests); *see also* ORD 430. Upon review, we find the sheriff’s office must withhold the submitted information under section 552.101 in conjunction with the constitutional right to privacy.<sup>1</sup>

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.

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<sup>1</sup> As our ruling is dispositive, we need not address your remaining arguments against disclosure of this information.

Sincerely,

Lindsay E. Hale  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

LEH/mo

Ref: ID# 838281

Enc. Submitted documents

c: 3 Requestors  
(w/o enclosures)