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ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

September 24, 2020

Ms. Mia Settle Vinson  
Open Records Attorney  
Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation  
P.O. Box 12157  
Austin, Texas 78711

OR2020-24101

Dear Ms. Vinson:

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# ID# 844957 (PIR# 202003300).

The Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation (the "department") received a request for records pertaining to a specified case number. You state the department will release some of the requested information. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.103, 552.107, and 552.111 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 information made confidential by other statutes, such as section 51.254 of the Occupations Code, which provides, in part:

(c) Except as otherwise provided by this section, a complaint and investigation concerning a person to whom this section applies and all information and materials subpoenaed or compiled by the department in connection with the complaint and investigation are confidential and not subject to:

(1) disclosure under [the Act.]

(d) A complaint or investigation subject to this section and all information and materials subpoenaed or compiled by the department in connection with the complaint and investigation may be disclosed to:

...

(2) a respondent or the respondent's authorized representative[.]

...

(i) Notices of alleged violation issued by the department against respondents, disciplinary proceedings of the department, . . . and final disciplinary actions, including warnings and reprimands, by the department . . . are not confidential and are subject to disclosure in accordance with [the Act].

Occ. Code § 51.254(c)(1), (d)(2), (i). Section 51.254(b) lists the professions to which section 51.254 applies and provides, in part:

(b) This section applies to health-related professions regulated by this state the administration of which is assigned to the department by law, including the following professions:

...

(9) podiatrists regulated under Chapter 202[.]

*Id.* § 51.254(b)(9). You state the submitted information consists of detailed complaint reports and the resulting investigations regarding violations of law or administrative rules regarding the conduct of a podiatrist. Further, you explain the submitted information includes information and documentation compiled by the department's Enforcement Division during investigations related to the alleged violations and the Enforcement Division's analysis of the evidence. Although we note some of the submitted information is a type of information contemplated by section 51.254(i), you state the department has already released this information to the requestor. *See id.* § 51.254(i).

We note, and you acknowledge, the requestor is the authorized representative of the respondent in the information at issue, and therefore, one of the parties to whom the information at issue may be disclosed. *See id.* § 51.254(d)(2). In Open Records Decision No. 458 (1987), this office addressed a similar statute that contained an exception to confidentiality based on bona fide research purposes. In that decision, we stated the language of the statute plainly establishes "it is within the [governmental body's] discretion to decide whether and to what extent to release confidential information[.]" ORD 458 at 5. The decision explained the statute states the governmental body "'may' disclose confidential information . . . not that it *must* or *shall* do so," and "the word 'may' is generally regarded as permissive in character." *Id.* (citing *Bloom v. State Bd. Exam'rs of Psychologists*, 492 S.W.2d 460, 462 (Tex. 1973); *San Angelo Nat'l Bank v. Fitzpatrick*, 30

S.W. 1053, 1054 (Tex. 1895)). In this instance, we believe the same rationale regarding the discretionary nature of the exceptions to confidentiality applies to section 51.254(d)(2). Thus, because releasing confidential information under section 51.254(d) is discretionary and we understand the department does not wish to exercise its discretion to release the information at issue, we conclude the requestor does not have a right of access to the information at issue under section 51.254(d)(2). Accordingly, based on your representations and our review of the information at issue, with the exception of the information subject to section 51.254(i), which you state you have released, we find the department must withhold the submitted information under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 51.254(c) of the Occupations Code.<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.

Sincerely,

Erin Groff  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

EMG/rm

Ref: ID# 844957

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor

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<sup>1</sup>As our ruling is dispositive, we need not address the remaining argument against disclosure of the submitted information.