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ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

August 1, 2022

Mr. Jeffrey T. Pender
Deputy General Counsel
Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs
P.O. Box 13941
Austin, Texas 78711-3941

OR2022-22560

Dear Mr. Pender:

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# 963145 (PIR# 7251).

The Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (the "department") received a request for communications pertaining to a named individual during a certain period of time. You state you have released some information. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.107 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Section 552.107(1) of the Government Code protects information coming within the attorney-client privilege. *See* Gov't Code § 552.107(1). When asserting the attorney-client privilege, a governmental body has the burden of providing the necessary facts to demonstrate the elements of the privilege in order to withhold the information at issue. ORD 676 at 6-7. First, a governmental body must demonstrate that the information constitutes or documents a communication. *Id.* at 7. Second, the communication must have been made "to facilitate the rendition of professional legal services" to the client governmental body. TEX. R. EVID. 503(b)(1). The privilege does not apply when an attorney or representative is involved in some capacity other than that of providing or facilitating professional legal services to the client governmental body. *In re Tex. Farmers Ins. Exch.*, 990 S.W.2d 337, 340 (Tex. App.—Texarkana 1999, orig. proceeding) (attorney-client privilege does not apply if attorney acting in a capacity other than that of attorney). Governmental attorneys often act in capacities other than that of professional legal counsel,

such as administrators, investigators, or managers. Thus, the mere fact that a communication involves an attorney for the government does not demonstrate this element. Third, the privilege applies only to communications between or among clients, client representatives, lawyers, and lawyer representatives. TEX. R. EVID. 503(b)(1). Thus, a governmental body must inform this office of the identities and capacities of the individuals to whom each communication at issue has been made. Lastly, the attorney-client privilege applies only to a *confidential* communication, *id.*, meaning it was “not intended to be disclosed to third persons other than those: (A) to whom disclosure is made to further the rendition of professional legal services to the client; or (B) reasonably necessary to transmit the communication.” *Id.* 503(a)(5). Whether a communication meets this definition depends on the *intent* of the parties involved at the time the information was communicated. *Osborne v. Johnson*, 954 S.W.2d 180, 184 (Tex. App.—Waco 1997, orig. proceeding). Moreover, because the client may elect to waive the privilege at any time, a governmental body must explain that the confidentiality of a communication has been maintained. Section 552.107(1) generally excepts an entire communication that is demonstrated to be protected by the attorney-client privilege unless otherwise waived by the governmental body. *See Huie v. DeShazo*, 922 S.W.2d 920, 923 (Tex. 1996) (privilege extends to entire communication, including facts contained therein).

You state the submitted information consists of communications involving department attorneys, legal staff, and employees in their capacities as clients. You also state these communications were made in furtherance of the rendition of professional legal services to the department. You further state these communications were confidential, and you do not indicate the department has waived the confidentiality of the information at issue. Based on your representations and our review, we find you have demonstrated the applicability of the attorney-client privilege the submitted information. Accordingly, the department may generally withhold the submitted information under section 552.107(1) of the Government Code. However, we note some of the otherwise privileged e-mail strings include e-mails sent to or received from the requestor, a non-privileged party. Furthermore, if these e-mails are removed from the otherwise privileged e-mail strings and stand alone, they are responsive to the instant request. Therefore, if the department maintains these non-privileged e-mails, which we marked, separate and apart from the otherwise privileged e-mail strings in which they appear, then this information may not be withheld under section 552.107(1).

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,

D. Michelle Case
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

DMH/mo

Ref: ID# 963145

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)