



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

November 21, 2022

Ms. Cynthia Tynan
Assistant General Counsel & Public Information Coordinator
The University of Texas System
210 West 7th Street
Austin, Texas 78701-2903

OR2022-36307

Dear Ms. Tynan:

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# 986800 (OGC No. 207204).

The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston (the "university") received a request for certain information pertaining to a named individual. You state the university will release some information to the requestor. You claim the submitted information is exempted from disclosure under sections 552.101 and 552.107 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted representative sample of information.¹

Section 552.101 of the Government Code exempts 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 51.971 of the Education Code, which provides, in relevant part:

(a) In this section:

(1) "Compliance program" means a process to assess and ensure compliance by the officers and employees of an institution of higher education with applicable laws, rules, regulations, and policies, including matters of:

(A) ethics and standards of conduct;

¹ We assume the "representative sample" of records submitted to this office is truly representative of the requested records as a whole. See Open Records Decision Nos. 499 (1988), 497 (1988). This open records letter does not reach, and therefore does not authorize the withholding of, any other requested records to the extent those records contain substantially different types of information than that submitted to this office.

- (B) financial reporting;
- (C) internal accounting controls; or
- (D) auditing.

...

(e) Information is excepted from disclosure under [the Act] if it is collected or produced:

- (1) in a compliance program investigation and releasing the information would interfere with an ongoing compliance investigation[.]

Educ. Code § 51.971(a), (e)(1). You state the university is an institution of higher education for purposes of section 61.003 of the Education Code. *See id.* § 51.971(a)(2). You explain some of the information at issue, which you indicated, was collected or produced in an ongoing university compliance program investigation and assert release of the information at issue would interfere with the investigation. Based on your representations and our review, we conclude the university must withhold the information you indicated under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 51.971(e)(1) of the Education Code.

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. Open Records Decision No. 676 at 6-7 (2002). 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 assert the remaining information consists of a privileged communication between university attorneys and university employees in their capacities as clients. You state this communication was made in furtherance of the rendition of professional legal services to the university. Further, you state this communication was intended to be, and has remained, confidential. Based on your representations and our review, we find you have demonstrated the applicability of the attorney-client privilege to the information at issue. Accordingly, the university may withhold the remaining information under section 552.107 of the Government Code.

In summary, the university must withhold the information you indicated under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 51.971(e)(1) of the Education Code. The university may withhold the remaining information under section 552.107 of the Government 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,

Blake Brennan
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

BBX/pt

Ref: ID# 986800

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)