



KEN PAXTON
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS

December 8, 2022

Ms. Kaitlyn J. Williams
Assistant County Attorney
Harris County
4800 Fournace Place, 6th Floor East
Bellaire, Texas 77401

OR2022-38107

Dear Ms. Williams:

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# 988331 (HCAO File No. 22hsp0815).

The Harris County Hospital District d/b/a Harris Health System (the "system") received a request for information pertaining to a specified investigation. You state you have released some information to the requestor. You claim the submitted information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. 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. Section 552.101 encompasses the doctrine of common-law privacy, which protects information that is (1) highly intimate or embarrassing, the publication of which would be highly objectionable to a reasonable person, and (2) not of legitimate concern to the public. *Indus. Found. v. Tex. Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668, 685 (Tex. 1976). To demonstrate the applicability of common-law privacy, both prongs of this test must be satisfied. *Id.* at 681-82. Types of information considered intimate and embarrassing by the Texas Supreme Court are delineated in *Industrial Foundation*. *Id.* at 683. In *Morales v. Ellen*, 840 S.W.2d 519 (Tex. App.—El Paso 1992, writ denied), the court addressed the applicability of the common-law doctrine to files of an investigation of allegations of sexual

harassment. The investigation files in *Ellen* contained individual witness statements, an affidavit by the individual accused of the misconduct responding to the allegations, and conclusions of the board of inquiry that conducted the investigation. *Ellen*, 840 S.W.2d at 525. The court ordered the release of the affidavit of the person under investigation and the conclusions of the board of inquiry, stating the public's interest was sufficiently served by the disclosure of such documents. *Id.* In concluding, the *Ellen* court held "the public did not possess a legitimate interest in the identities of the individual witnesses, nor the details of their personal statements beyond what is contained in the documents that have been ordered released." *Id.* Thus, if there is an adequate summary of an investigation of alleged sexual harassment, the investigation summary must be released under *Ellen*, along with the statement of the accused. However, the identities of the victims and witnesses of the alleged sexual harassment must be redacted, and their detailed statements must be withheld from disclosure. *See* Open Records Decision Nos. 393 (1983), 339 (1982). However, when no adequate summary exists, detailed statements regarding the allegations must be released, but the identities of the victims and witnesses must still be redacted from the statements. In either case, the identity of the individual accused of sexual harassment is not protected from public disclosure. We also note supervisors are generally not witnesses for purposes of *Ellen*, except where their statements appear in a non-supervisory context.

The submitted information relates to an investigation into an alleged sexual harassment. Upon review, we determine the submitted information does not contain an adequate summary of the alleged sexual harassment. Because there is no adequate summary of the investigation, the system must generally release any information pertaining to the investigation of alleged sexual harassment. However, the information at issue contains the identities of the victims and witnesses of the alleged sexual harassment. Accordingly, the system must withhold such information, which we marked, under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common-law privacy and the holding in *Ellen*. *See Ellen*, 840 S.W.2d at 525. However, we find the system has not demonstrated any portion of the remaining information at issue is highly intimate or embarrassing and not of legitimate public interest. Thus, the system may not withhold any of the remaining information under section 552.101 in conjunction with common-law privacy. The system must release the remaining information.

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,

Kimbell Kesling
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

KK/pt

Ref: ID# 988331

Enc. Submitted documents

c: Requestor
(w/o enclosures)