

Opinion 2007-306

November 16, 2007

Mr. Michael Value
c/o William R. Riddell, Esquire
4 Evergreen Circle
Little Rock, AR 72207

Dear Mr. Value:

I am writing in response to your request, made pursuant to A.C.A. § 25-19-105(c)(3)(B), for an opinion on whether the decision of the City of Little Rock to release your personnel file in response to a Freedom of Information Act request is consistent with that law. *See* A.C.A. § 25-19-101 to -109 (Repl. 2002 and Supp. 2007). Specifically, a request has been made for your personnel file under the FOIA. The requester has stated that she is “not interested in [your] SSN or other exempt information and do[es] not object to the required redaction.” The custodian of the records has determined that the requested “information meets the definition of a personnel record under the Freedom of Information Act is releasable.” You ask for my opinion “as to whether the information may be released in whole or part with redacting where necessary.”

RESPONSE

My statutory duty under A.C.A. § 25-19-105(c)(3)(B) is to determine whether the decision of the custodian of records as to the release of “personnel or evaluation records” is consistent with the FOIA. Having not been provided with the records in question, I am unable to opine conclusively as to the release of any particular documents and can only set out the applicable tests for disclosure. A number of documents contained in personnel files are typically releasable under the FOIA, with appropriate redactions. The custodian has not mentioned any particular redactions, and his or her decision as to any required redactions may or may not be consistent with the FOIA, depending upon the content of the records and the redactions made. A number of items, such as home address, are required to be

redacted from such files. A failure to redact such items would be inconsistent with the FOIA. I have set out the applicable tests for disclosure below.

The FOIA provides for the disclosure upon request of certain “public records,” which the Arkansas Code defines as follows:

“Public records” means writings, recorded sounds, films, tapes, electronic or computer-based information, or data compilations in any medium, required by law to be kept or otherwise kept, and which constitute a record of the performance or lack of performance of official functions which are or should be carried out by a public official or employee, a governmental agency, or any other agency wholly or partially supported by public funds or expending public funds. All records maintained in public offices or by public employees within the scope of their employment shall be presumed to be public records.

A.C.A. § 25-19-103(5)(A) (Supp. 2005). Given that you are a city employee, I believe documents containing the requested information clearly qualify as “public records” under this definition. As one of my predecessors noted in Op. Att’y Gen. No. 1999-305, “If records fit within the definition of ‘public records’ . . . they are open to public inspection and copying under the FOIA except to the extent they are covered by a specific exemption in that Act or some other pertinent law.” *Id.* at 2.

A “personnel file” of a public employee will typically include “personnel records” as well as “employee evaluations or job performance records” for purposes of the FOIA. *See, e.g.,* Op. Att’y Gen. 2005-011. Different tests for the release of records apply to these two categories. Custodians should ensure the proper classification of each document within the personnel file in order to apply the proper test relating to each category of record. While I am unable to reach a definitive answer without copies of the records in question, I will set forth the applicable test that should be considered in these circumstances.

Although the FOIA does not define the term “personnel records,” as used therein, this office has consistently taken the position that “personnel records” are any records other than employee evaluation/job performance records that relate to the individual employee. Op. Att’y Gen. 2006-071.

Personnel records must be released unless their disclosure would constitute a “clearly unwarranted invasion of [the employee’s] personal privacy.” A.C.A. § 25-19-105(b)(12). The FOIA does not define the phrase “clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy.” However, the Arkansas Supreme Court has construed the phrase. In determining which disclosures constitute a “clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy,” the court applies a balancing test. The court will weigh the interest of the public in accessing the records against the individual’s interest in keeping the records private. *See Young v. Rice*, 308 Ark. 593, 826 S.W.2d 252 (1992).

If the public’s interest outweighs the individual’s interest, the release of the records will not constitute a “clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy.” The court in *Young* noted the following in this regard:

The fact that section 25-19-105(b)(10) [now subsection 105(b)(12)] exempts disclosure of personnel records only when a clearly unwarranted personal privacy invasion would result, indicates that certain ‘warranted’ privacy invasions will be tolerated. Thus, section 25-19-105(b)(10) requires that the public’s right to knowledge of the records be weighed against an individual’s right to privacy. . . . Because section 25-19-105(b)(10) allows warranted invasions of privacy, it follows that when the public’s interest is substantial, it will usually outweigh any individual privacy interests and disclosure will be favored.

Young, 308 Ark. at 598.

If there is little public interest in information, however, the privacy interest will prevail if it is not insubstantial. *See Stillely v. McBride*, 332 Ark. 306, 965 S.W.2d 125 (1998). Additionally, given that exemptions from disclosure must be narrowly construed, *see, e.g., Orsini v. State*, 340 Ark. 665, 13 S.W.3d 167 (2000), it is the burden of an individual resisting disclosure to establish that his “privacy interests outweighed that of the public’s under the circumstances presented.” *Stillely, supra*, 332 Ark. at 313.

Because I have not reviewed any of specific documents in your “personnel file,” I cannot offer a definitive opinion as to their classification or release. In Op. Att’y Gen. 2006-048, my immediate predecessor listed a number of documents that were subject to release under the above test for personnel records. He enumerated items that are typically subject to release as including: public employees’ names,

dates of hire, job titles and salaries; amounts paid for accrued leave; education backgrounds, including schools attended and degrees received; work histories; work e-mail addresses; listed telephone numbers, assuming there is no heightened privacy interest; attendance and leave records; payroll forms documenting leaves of absence; documents related to any compensation a former employee receives in addition to their regular paycheck; contracts or agreements related to an employee's separation from employment; internal affairs notification documents; notice of personnel action; job applications; resumes, including references; and letters of recommendation.

On the other hand, my predecessor concluded, and I agree, that the public generally has little interest in the personal details of the following information: insurance coverage; tax information or withholding; payroll deductions; banking information; marital status of employees and information about dependents; personal e-mail addresses; unlisted telephone numbers; social security numbers; and date of birth. My predecessor also noted the specific exceptions for state income tax records (A.C.A. § 25-19-105(b)(1) (Supp. 2005)) and home addresses of non-elected state, municipal and county employees (A.C.A. § 25-19-105(b)(13)). He also mentioned photocopies of drivers' licenses and social security cards as being exempt. *Id.* at 4.

Again, I cannot address all of the potential items that might need to be redacted under the "personnel records" exemption. The custodian of the records must review each document to determine whether it is subject to release under this test and whether any appropriate redactions are required.

With regard to "employee evaluation or job performance records," again, the FOIA does not define this term, nor has the phrase been construed by the Arkansas Supreme Court. This office has consistently taken the position that any records that were created by or at the behest of the employer and that detail the performance or lack of performance of the employee in question with regard to a specific incident or incidents are properly classified as employee evaluation or job performance records. *See, e.g.*, Ops. Att'y Gen. 2006-038; 2006-035; 2005-030; 2004-211; 2003-073; 98-006; 97-222; 95-351; 94-306; and 93-055. The record must also have been created for the purpose of evaluating an employee. *See, e.g.*, Op. Att'y Gen. 2006-038; and 2004-012. The exemption promotes candor in a supervisor's evaluation of an employee's performance with a view toward correcting any deficiencies. *See* J. Watkins & R. Peltz, *THE ARKANSAS FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT* (m&m Press, 4th ed. 2004) at 196.

In my opinion, documents such as written reprimands and letters of caution, documents supporting a recommendation for suspension or dismissal, letters related to promotions and demotions, and records that were generated as part of an investigation of allegations of the misconduct and that detail incidents that gave rise to such allegations generally fall within the category of “employee evaluations or job performance records.” *See, e.g.,* Ops. Att’y Gen. 2006-035; 2003-078; 2001-203; 99-147; 93-105; 93-055; 92-231; and 91-324.

“Employee evaluation or job performance records” are releasable only if the following three conditions have been met:

1. There has been a final administrative resolution of any suspension or termination proceeding;
2. The records in question formed a basis for the decision made in that proceeding to suspend or terminate the employee; and
3. There is a compelling public interest in the disclosure of the records in question.

A.C.A. § 25-19-105(c)(1). Employee evaluation or job performance records cannot be released unless each prong of this test has been met.

As my predecessor noted in Op. Att’y Gen. 2006-007 “[t]he question of whether there has been a final administrative resolution of a termination or suspension and the question of whether the requested records formed a basis for that termination or suspension are clearly questions of fact that can be readily determined.” *Id.* at 6, *citing* Op. Att’y Gen. 2005-011.

With regard to the final portion of this test, the FOIA at no point defines the phrase ‘compelling public interest.’ However, Professors Watkins and Peltz, referring to this office’s opinions on this issue, offer the following guidelines:

[I]t seems that the following factors should be considered in determining whether a compelling public interest is present: (1) the nature of the infraction that led to suspension or termination, with particular concern as to whether violations of the public trust or gross incompetence are involved; (2) the existence of a public controversy related to the agency and its employees; and (3) the

employee's position within the agency. In short, a general interest in the performance of public employees should not be considered compelling, for that concern is, at least theoretically, always present. However, a link between a given public controversy, an agency associated with the controversy in a specific way, and an employee within the who commits a serious breach of public trust should be sufficient to satisfy the 'compelling public interest' requirement.

Watkins and Peltz, *supra* at 207 (footnotes omitted). Professors Watkins and Peltz also note that "the status of the employee" or "his rank within the bureaucratic hierarchy" may be relevant in determining whether a "compelling public interest" exists. *Id.* at 206 (noting that "[a]s a practical matter, such an interest is more likely to be present when a high-level employee is involved than when the [records] of 'rank-and-file' workers are at issue.") The existence of a "compelling public interest" in disclosure will necessarily depend upon all of the surrounding facts and circumstances.

In my opinion, the decision of the custodian of records in this instance may be consistent with the FOIA assuming that the custodian has evaluated each document within the personnel file according to the standards set forth above. As I have previously noted, I cannot offer a definite opinion on specific documents without the records in question and/or information as to the redactions made by the custodian. It seems evident under the tests set out above, however, that at least some redactions are necessary to shield, for example, the employees' addresses and other exempt items.

Deputy Attorney General Elana C. Wills prepared the foregoing opinion, which I hereby approve.

Sincerely,

DUSTIN McDANIEL
Attorney General

DM:ECW/cyh