

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
MAYOR'S OFFICE OF LEGAL COUNSEL
Freedom of Information Act Appeal: 2020-222**

September 12, 2022

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Henry Schlick

RE: FOIA Appeal 2020-222

Dear Mr. Schlick:

This letter is in response to the administrative appeal that you have submitted to the Mayor pursuant to the District of Columbia Freedom of Information Act ("FOIA"), D.C. Code §§ 2-531, *et seq.* In your appeal, you have challenged the response of the Metropolitan Police Department ("MPD") to your July 14, 2020 FOIA request, identified as 2020-FOIA-06558, which sought the names of individuals arrested within a series of Central Complaint Numbers ("CCNs").

On July 15, 2020, MPD denied your request because, in the absence of an authorization and/or waiver, the release of the records would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy and is exempt from disclosure pursuant to D.C. Code § 2-534(a)(2) and (a)(3)(C).

In your appeal, you have asserted that "the information requested is part of the public record, because the arrested individuals' names associated with the incident numbers are publicly available alongside the incident number at [the] D.C. Superior Court."

However, under the applicable case law, the public nature of information does not necessitate the subsequent release of related documents. *DOJ v. Reporters Comm. for Freedom of the Press*, 489 U.S. 749, 762 (1989); *Long v. United States DOJ*, 450 F. Supp. 2d 42, 68 (D.D.C. 2006) ("the fact that some of the personal information contained in these records already has been made public in some form does not eliminate the privacy interest in avoiding further disclosure by the government."); *Edmonds v. FBI*, 272 F. Supp. 2d 35, 53 (D.D.C. 2003) (finding that media identification of persons mentioned in a law enforcement file "does not lessen their privacy interests or 'defeat the exemption,' for prior disclosure of personal information does not eliminate an individual's privacy interest in avoiding subsequent disclosure by the government").

D.C. Official Code § 2-534(a)(2) ("Exemption 2") applies to "[i]nformation of a personal nature where the public disclosure thereof would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy."

D.C. Official Code § 2-534(a)(3)(C) ("Exemption 3") is more expansive than Exemption 2 and protects from public disclosure information contained in an investigatory file that "would constitute an unwarranted invasion of privacy." Exemption 3 lacks the key word "clearly" that is contained in Exemption 2, and therefore is a broader privacy privilege.

In assessing MPD's decision to withhold the requested information, the first part of the analysis is determining whether a sufficient privacy interest exists. *Id.* A privacy interest is cognizable under D.C. FOIA if it is substantial, which is anything greater than *de minimis*. *Multi AG Media LLC v. Dep't of Agric.*, 515 F.3d 1224, 1229 (D.C. Cir. 2008). In general, there is a sufficient privacy interest in personal identifying information. *Skinner v. U.S. Dep't. of Justice*, 806 F. Supp. 2d 105, 113 (D.D.C. 2011). Information such as names, personal phone numbers, and home addresses are considered to be personally identifiable information and are therefore exempt from disclosure. *See, e.g., Department of Defense v. FLRA*, 510 U.S. 487, 500 (1994). Moreover, the D.C. Circuit has held individuals have a "strong interest" in not being associated with unwarrantedly with alleged criminal activity whether they be suspects, witnesses, or investigators. *Fitzgibbon v. CIA*, 911 F.2d 755, 767 (1990).

The second part of a privacy analysis examines whether an individual privacy interest is outweighed by the public interest. *See Reporters Comm. for Freedom of Press*, 489 U.S. at 772-773. In the context of D.C. FOIA, a record is deemed to be of "public interest" if it would shed light on an agency's conduct. *Beck v. Department of Justice, et al.*, 997 F.2d 1489 (D.C. Cir. 1993). As the court held in *Beck*:

This statutory purpose is furthered by disclosure of official information that "sheds light on an agency's performance of its statutory duties." *Reporters Committee*, 489 U.S. at 773; *see also Ray*, 112 S. Ct. at 549. Information that "reveals little or nothing about an agency's own conduct" does not further the statutory purpose; thus the public has no cognizable interest in the release of such information. *See Reporters Committee*, 489 U.S. at 773.

Id. at 1492-93.

In balancing the privacy interest of an individual named in an incident and/or investigative report versus any public interest in disclosure, it is unclear how disclosing the identities of these individuals is relevant to MPD's conduct as an agency. Further, the Supreme Court has held courts have found "as a categorical matter that a third party's request for law enforcement records or information about a private citizen can reasonably be expected to invade that citizen's privacy, and that when the request seeks no "official information" about a government agency, but merely records that the Government happens to be storing, the invasion of privacy is "unwarranted." . . ." *Reporters Comm. For Freedom of Press*, 489 U.S. at 780. In the absence of any identified countervailing public interest, MPD may withhold the identified information and its decision to do so is affirmed.

Additional information may be available, outside the context of FOIA, by satisfying MPD's disclosure policy, *e.g.* by presenting a waiver of an authorized individual as requested, and the requestor is encouraged to initiate that process with MPD, if desired.

This constitutes the final decision of this Office. You may challenge any subsequent response to your request by separate appeal to this Office. If you are dissatisfied with this decision, you may commence a civil action in the Superior Court of the District of Columbia in accordance with D.C. Code § 2-537.

Sincerely,

The Mayor's Office of Legal Counsel

cc: Brandynn Reaves, MPD FOIA Officer (via email only)